

## The Royal Treatment

by Sonja Franeta (from *Berry of a Mountain Bush*)

Worn out from traveling 25 hours on a train from Yantai to Shanghai and not knowing a word of Chinese, we searched for a phone to call my Level 1 student from City College in San Francisco, who was spending the summer in her hometown. Winnie, my student's Americanized name, said I could call her when I reached Shanghai, and she would show us around and even find us a place to stay.

I took out my trusty **Chinese at a Glance**, which my partner, Leslie, and I had been using frantically on the train in trying to communicate with our cabin-mate. The difficulty with Chinese is the impossible correlation between the sound and the characters, which are a course of study in themselves. Approaching an official-looking woman, I showed her the character for "telephone" in my book. She pointed straight ahead in soldierly fashion. I walked toward the merchants and kept looking back to see if I was going in the right direction. She nodded and kept pointing. I spied a telephone. When I dialed the number my student had given me, a woman speaking Chinese answered. I tried to ask for Winnie. I said "Teacher Sonja," hoping she would know something about my visit. Unfortunately, nothing was accomplished.

Leslie and I decided to take a cab into town to find the Peace Hotel, which we had read about. Later that evening I asked one of the hotel receptionists to help me speak to Winnie's family. I learned that Winnie was in Hong Kong but that there would be someone else who could speak English and I should call back. Les and I decided not to pursue the contact and just discover Shanghai ourselves.

Traveling through Japan and Korea and so far through China had been such a rich experience. The language barrier turned out to be a way of meeting people and of experiencing their generosity. In Tokyo we asked two young women to point us in the direction of a street we were looking for. Shy about using the little English they knew, I praised them: "Good English!" like I would some of my students. They both burst out laughing but took the time to lead us to our destination.

After a delicious meal at the Dragon and Phoenix in the Peace Hotel, we were sleeping soundly, tired from our grueling train trip. The phone rang. It was after midnight. A man with a Chinese accent said something about Winnie.

"She's in Hong Kong. I am her brother. She asked me to show you Shanghai and wants you to have a good time while you are here. When would you like to meet tomorrow?" He spoke English very well.

I mumbled sleepily that we didn't want to bother anyone, we would be fine on our own. He protested and insisted, "No, it's no bother. Please, Winnie told me to show you Shanghai. I'm her brother." I was too tired to argue so I agreed to meet him after our river trip the next day. We were soon to find out what royal treatment for an American English teacher was in Shanghai.

In the Peace Hotel lobby, a tall, smiling, round-faced man with an upturned collar approached us. It was Bao, who we later found out was Winnie's cousin not brother. He was polite and pleasant, with a sophisticated air of confidence. He told us he was a tour guide for the Chinese International Travel Service (the government tourist agency) but was on a leave of absence because of illness.

As if we were his tour group, Bao led us to the Yu Yuan Gardens in a central shopping and tourist area near the "Bund." Then we proceeded to a beautiful Chinese tea house

surrounded by water and fountains. Upstairs, in a room paneled with mahogany, we had green tea and pigeon eggs, tofu, and rice snacks. Later we had dinner at the Green Wave Restaurant, where Bill and Hilary had eaten just a week earlier. Bao ordered for us with a royal air, which made us feel like queens. (Were we all just American Imperialists like the Clintons?)

We could only eat half the sumptuous spread before us, and Bao insisted on paying. "I'm keeping the receipts for Winnie. She said to pay for all the taxi fares too. You are her guests and I will not accept any money." He took his job very seriously. Did my teaching deserve such royal treatment?

During the evening his cell phone rang a few times. One of the calls was Winnie checking up on our dinner. She wanted to say a few words but her English was not quite adequate for a phone conversation. I wondered what she learned in that crowded basement classroom at City College.

The final evening was a crowning touch to our absent hostess's hospitality. Bao led us through the maze of bicycles, pedi-cabs, and cars. The streets in downtown Shanghai seemed permanently gridlocked, but somehow cars plunged ahead and cyclists were stoic and fearless. Pedestrians were the last in consideration. As Bao serenely crossed in the middle of the street, we jerked our heads from side to side to scoot through, hanging onto one another.

In the evening we dined at a tourist restaurant that boasted Mongolian style barbecue. We were scheduled to go there with our China tour, which started in a couple of days, but Bao still kept it on our itinerary. We were the only ones in a massive banquet room designed for a hundred tourists. Our host seemed friendly with all the employees.

"I always used to bring my groups here so this is a reunion of old friends." He introduced me to one of the workers, probably as Winnie's teacher, and I saw her face light up in admiration.

His cell phone rang again several times, while we ate. Once when he got off the phone he told us, "That was Winnie's brother. By the way, do you know what kind of business Winnie and her husband have?"

I said no and explained that I didn't know Winnie very well—I had a class of 50 students and there really wasn't much opportunity to get to know individuals.

"They have a factory that makes those uh-hh... covers for women. I don't know what they are called." And he gestured where, over his chest, the cover might go.

I said, "Brassiere, or bra."

"Yes, Winnie's are sold in all the major department stores. She and her husband have a factory in the south of China."

The phone rang again. This time he was very animated and seemed almost angry, or at least firm on the phone.

"Winnie's brother wants us to go to the department store immediately. To choose that... what do you call it?"

"Brassiere?" said Leslie.

"Yes," he said, shaking his head, "but I told him it was late." Actually, it wasn't late. Perhaps Bao himself had plans for the evening.

"I'm glad you said that, because we are tired," I said and got no response. We had no choice in the matter.

About five minutes later the phone rang again. This time it was Winnie calling from Hong Kong adamant that her teacher have the opportunity to pick out a bra at the department store. Another phone call to the brother and we were on our way to the Pacific, one of the finest department stores in Shanghai! As the taxi inched closer to our destination, traffic came to a complete standstill. Bao paid the driver, we stepped out onto the street and climbed

several pedestrian overpasses to get to the store. The area was buzzing with people and brightly lit with flashing signs and billboards.

We used the escalator to get to the 3rd floor lingerie department. Winnie's brother smiled as he met us. We shook hands and he led us to a small area that just belonged to "La Passion." An older, small woman with her hair done in a fluffy bun at the top of her head came up to me and swept her hand over the bras urging me to choose one. I quickly chose a white lace one and told Bao I didn't know my Chinese size.

"She will help you." The woman pulled out a blue bra, but I shook my head. She put the bra next to my eyes. I continued to shake my head—what would I do with a bright blue bra?

When I entered the small fitting room she followed me in to help. My size ended up being 80B! The saleswoman smiled excitedly and got another "La Passion" bra of the same size, which I also tried on. Everyone waited for me to come out of the dressing room. Bao told me to pick out anything else I wanted. I actually was feeling overwhelmed and told him I was not comfortable about getting anything else. Before we left, one last thing, the saleswoman pressed two pairs of tiny underwear into my hands.

We thanked Bao profusely and told him we hoped to see Winnie when we got to Hong Kong later in our trip.

A fax was waiting for us in our hotel in Xian, from Bao of all people. "Winnie's in Shanghai." She wouldn't be in Hong Kong, after all, when we got there, but she sent her greetings.

I was sorry not to have experienced China with our elusive hostess.