



BY JACK MOORE

The menace of the urban bear

The Fungs have been my next door neighbours for some years now, and in the manner of Hong Kong neighbours who speak different languages, we have exchanged smiles and josans and Merry Christmases and Gung Hei Fat Choys throughout that time, but nothing much else.

So when Mrs. Fung tapped on my door last week and invited me over for tea and buns I was a bit mystified — until I met her sister who, the very next day, was boarding a plane to go start a new life in (you guessed it) Canada.

She had never before been to Canada, and I had obviously been called in as the friendly Canadian who lives next door and might possibly offer some last-minute advice about the coming culture shock.

Her English was academic but understandable and my Cantonese is lumpy but effective, so we were able to swap information with relative ease. And as it turned out, she already knew more about Canada than many home-grown Canadians do.

Go-for-broke

Like a lot of Hong Kongers, she grew up with an almost spiritual regard for education. She's bright, she's used to studying *very* hard for exams, and she evidently regarded stepping off the plane in Canada as the beginning of the toughest all-or-nothing go-for-broke test she'd ever have to pass.

Consequently, she had read every piece of printed material issued by the Canadian government — which is a *lot* — and studied up on Canadian history, which she said happily was “short and easy to learn.”

She had also intently pored over local media coverage of Canadian news stories so as to arrive there aware of current events, and she had rented several travel videos on Canada and (I swear) had taken notes while she watched them and listened to the Cantonese commentary.

Clearly, this person was serious about coming to terms with whatever challenges Canada might present, and as she told me all this I wondered vaguely what

I could tell her that she didn't already know.

As it turned out, what she wanted to know about was bears.

Nothing else, just bears. As soon as the tea was properly poured, she started asking questions about bears, and she didn't stop for the next hour.

At first I thought she was an avid outdoorsy nature fan in search of Canadian wildlife, but when I took that conversational tack she giggled nervously and said I didn't understand. She didn't want to know how to approach bears, she explained, she just wanted to know how to avoid them.

A fixation

Her research on Canada had exposed her to a certain amount of information about bears, and none of it had made her any less afraid of them. In truth, bears had become something of a fixation with her.

She said that nothing about Canada really worried her except bears — or the possibility of bears. So she wanted to know a great deal more about these animals and, (though I really don't know much more about bears than I know about dragons,) I answered her questions as thoroughly and honestly as I could.

Do bears come into the city? (It depends what city. Avoid Churchill, Manitoba, and be careful about Banff.) Do they break into houses? (Well, it has happened — but not recently in Scarborough or Richmond, B.C. Best you don't worry too much about that.)

Are they big enough to knock down doors? (Well actually, the way they make doors these days, yes.) Do they attack cars? (Not if you're driving fast enough.) Do they attack at night? (Well, see, they mostly don't attack at all. Make a loud noise and they'll usually run away.) But not always? (Uh, well no ... not always.)

Do they hide in the snow? (Yes, but when they do that, they're asleep for three or four months.) So that means they're up and around during the other eight months? (Uh, well ... yes.)

How far south do polar bears live? (Not far enough to worry about.) How big are Kodiak bears? (Big — but they're only on Kodiak Island, and that isn't even in Canada.)

And how about (and here I could see real fear in her eyes) *grizzly* bears?

There ... it was out in the open. Obviously, she had studied at least one memorable book or wildlife video about grizzly bears, and had thereupon decided — for reasons that make perfect sense — that she never, ever, EVER wanted to encounter one of them.

“Honestly,” I said, “believe me, you won't. Yes, grizzly bears are big and mean and homicidal, but they're also way out in the mountains, where you are not likely to go unless you really want to. Really, they're no problem.”

Code of Silence

But I could tell she still didn't believe me. I think she suspected that there's some sort of tacit Canadian Code of Silence about what she obviously thought of as The Bear Menace — rather like a beach resort where they suppress the news of shark attacks so as to prevent panic among tourists.

I'm sure she still thought I was glossing over Canada's greatest outdoor safety hazard when we finished the tea and I thanked Mrs. Fung and wished her sister happy landings.

At the very least, I'm sure she believed Canadians are far too casual about bears, and that when she arrived in Canada the countryside would probably be thick with snarling, slavering bruins looking to make lunch out of Far Eastern immigrants.

Whatever else happens, I'd suspect that right now — while Mrs. Fung's sister is actively on the lookout for grizzlies in metro Toronto or downtown Victoria — she has already decided that dealing with everything else in Canada is a piece of cake. ♦

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