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Eats, Shoots, and Weaves

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Eats, Shoots, and Weaves

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“I assume you’re Buddhist?” My face twisted in bewilderment. I didn’t immediately know how to answer this question.

It was Good Friday 1982, the day I first met my in-laws-to-be. My future brother-in-law and his wife had driven to the family farm in northern Indiana, ostensibly to observe the spring ritual with family, but really to observe me. My soon-to-be father-in-law raised his wine glass in a toast “to all of us who celebrate this Easter season.” He then turned to me and dropped his bombshell, “I assume you’re Buddhist?”



My mother’s maternal grandfather was one of the founding fathers of the First Chinese Church of Christ in Honolulu, Hawaii, where my parents were married. My grandparents sent their five sons to Saint Ignatius and their five daughters to the Convent of the Sacred Heart – schools that would provide their children with the best obtainable education in Hawaii.

Although born in Honolulu, I grew up in San Francisco. There, half of my mother’s family gathered together throughout the year to celebrate an indiscriminate canon of American, Christian, and Chinese festivals: New Year’s Eve, Chinese New Year’s Eve, Easter, the Dragon Boat Festival, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, the Harvest Moon Festival, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

Forty or more of us – aunts, uncles, cousins, and calabash¹ relatives – would gather to prepare and consume an equally diverse menu. There was the standard American fare: turkey and pumpkin pie, Easter eggs and roast leg of lamb. But there was also dim sum, poi, sushi, steamed sticky rice wrapped in ti-leaves, and moon cake.

My family did not attend religious services or observe any particular religion. But one afternoon, when my brother and I were about ten and eight, we helped my father carefully shovel and then vacuum the ashes out of the fireplace. This was one of our regular chores, but this time, Dad transformed it into an altar, arranging on the hearth sticks of incense, short stacks of funerary money, small dishes of Chinese food, and porcelain cups filled with tea. He instructed my brother and me to kneel beside him, bow our heads until they touched the floor, offer tea – the cup held by the fingertips of both hands, and burn the paper money. We performed this ritual only once.

¹ In a traditional Hawaiian luau, a calabash was used as a large serving bowl on a buffet table or in the middle of the dining table. The use of the calabash in Hawaii in terms such as "Calabash Family" or "Calabash Cousins" indicates that an extended family has grown up around shared meals and close friendships.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calabash>

Fifty years later, I asked my mother if she had prepared the small dishes, if she had put a stop to repeat performances. But my mother denied any knowledge of the event, insisting that I must have imagined it. Luckily, my brother was able to corroborate my story, confirming that no, neither our mother nor our older brother were there; that yes, there was food, tea, and incense, and we burned paper money.

My father had had to furtively plot to enact this ritual with us. He had to know when both my mother and my oldest brother would be out of the house for most of a day. He had to purchase and hide the funerary items. As he doesn't cook, he had to drive to Chinatown the same day to obtain the freshly-prepared dishes. He had to make sure that there was enough time to restore the altar back to a fireplace and purge the scent of incense from the house, removing any evidence that a non-Christian ritual had taken place.

The answer to my future father-in-law should have been, "Yes, I *am* Buddhist," if wafting incense over my head at a fireplace altar when I was eight made me Buddhist in the same way that sprinkling water on my head at a Presbyterian altar, thirty years later, made me Christian.

Perhaps the second ceremony neutralized the first.

Perhaps the first event immunized me against the second.



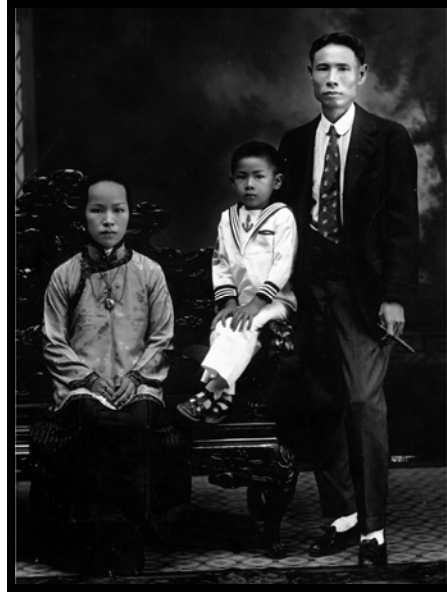
Three weeks after that Easter weekend, on the first of May 1982, my husband and I married, and Buddhist or not, I became a member of his family.

So much catch-up to do for a woman who has known the man she married only for a few weeks. Out came the family albums. There was the formal portrait of my husband's father's family: his grandparents, his father dressed in a sailor outfit, and his infant sister. "We have a picture like this," I said, referring to a photograph in my family's albums.



Figure 1. My father-in-law with his parents and infant sister, circa 1923.
Photograph: unknown professional studio, Chicago, Illinois.

Gustav Peterson was twenty-four when he immigrated in 1911 from Sweden to Chicago. Five years later, he sent for a wife. Emma Hero, a woman he knew to be strong and hardworking, was twenty-five when she crossed the Atlantic. They purchased a small farm in Indiana where my husband's father, Sigurd, was born in 1918. The photograph of Skif's father's family was taken in Chicago, in 1923, when Sigurd was five.



*Figure 2. My father with his parents, circa 1924.
Photograph: unknown professional studio, Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii.*

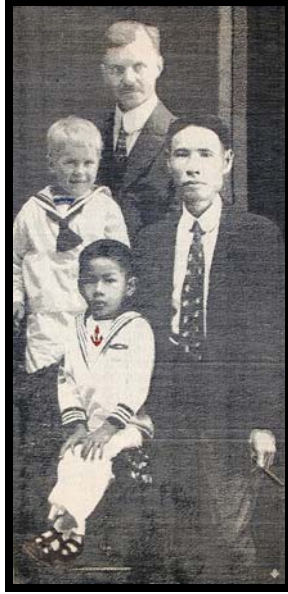
In 1889, at the age of thirteen, Jack On Lee² traveled from Canton to the Kingdom of Hawaii.³ After working off his labor contract with a sugar plantation, he apprenticed himself to a tailor. This was not an arbitrary choice of profession; as a young child, he had peddled sewing notions on the streets of his village in China. He eventually set up his own custom tailoring shop in Honolulu – on Hotel Street – half way between downtown and Chinatown. In his late thirties – when he had enough income to support a family – he entered into an arranged marriage.

When she married, my paternal grandmother was twenty-four – an old maid by Chinese standards. Yuk Sin Chun⁴ was born in Hawaii in 1890, and when Hawaii became a Territory of the United States in 1898, she and the rest of her family became American citizens. Some time after that, my grandmother was sent to live in China – possibly to marry and re-establish the family in China. Perhaps no Chinese man wanted a “foreign-born” woman for a wife because she was still unmarried and living in China in 1914, when my grandfather arranged for her return. The formal photograph of my grandparents and my father, then ten years old, was taken in 1924 or 1925, just before the family traveled to China for a one-year visit.

² 李澤安 Li³ Ze² An¹ (Beneficial Peace)

³ The Kingdom of Hawaii became a Territory of the United States in 1898 and the 50th state of the United States in 1959.

⁴ 陳玉仙 Chen⁴ Yu⁴ Xian¹ (Jade Angel)



*Figure 3. “Fourfathers” by the author, handwoven on a computerized Jacquard loom, 2000.
Photograph: Clifford B. Peterson.*

Two families from opposite sides of the globe collide in the new world called the United States of America, all trace of their cultural and ethnic identity erased. Both boys are dressed in the children’s fashion of the day: white middy suits.⁵ The men both wear spotted ties and white shirts with round-tipped collars. Only my grandmother is dressed in ethnic clothing. Ironically, she is the only one of the four adults in the two photographs who was born in a land that was to become part of the United States.



*Figure 4. My mother-in-law’s family, 1945.
Photograph: unknown photographer, Chicago, Illinois.*

⁵ My grandfather – being a tailor – designed and sewed my father’s middy suit.

In my husband's mother's family album, there is a family portrait taken in Chicago in 1945, commemorating his great grandparent's fiftieth wedding anniversary. The MacKenzies were born in Canada and immigrated to Chicago where they were married in 1895. In the photograph⁶ are their four children, one son-in-law, two daughters-in-law, six grandchildren, and their first great-grandchild – my husband's older brother – who is perched on the lap of his grandmother. One of their sons, dressed in uniform, was a quartermaster in the US Army.

My husband's father was also in the Army but does not appear in this photograph because he was stationed in Hawaii. Had he known my mother's family, he would have been able to join our family photo session as the future father-in-law of a future granddaughter.



*Figure 5. My mother's family, 1946.
Photograph: unknown photographer, Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii.*

The photograph of my mother's family was taken in Honolulu in 1946 to commemorate the fact that the entire family had survived the war and was together at the same time and place. My maternal grandmother, Lau Sau Chan⁷, was born in the Kingdom of Hawaii in 1886 and, like my paternal grandmother, became a United States citizen in 1898, when Hawaii became a United States territory. She is the only person in the photograph wearing Chinese-style clothing.

In the photograph are my maternal grandparents' five sons, five daughters, three sons-in-law, one daughter-in-law, and six grandchildren. My oldest brother is three years old and sits at my mother's feet. My father, in his Army khakis, was a major in US Army Corps of Engineers. My mother's youngest brother wears his US Navy uniform.

⁶ In the weaving, I deleted one person on the far left – a relative from Canada – for compositional and contextual reasons.

⁷ 劉秀珍 Liu² Xiu⁴ Zhen¹ (Clever (“intelligent without seeming so”) Treasure)

Another uncle, standing in the back row, fourth from the left, graduated from Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, in 1945. His first two years overlapped with those of my husband's parents who graduated from Purdue in 1943. Had my uncle met them at Purdue, he might have haggled with them over an acceptable number of chickens and cows to be exchanged for the marriage between his future niece and their future son.



*Figure 6. Digital image of "Fourbearers," by the author.
The weaving (not shown) was handwoven on a computerized Jacquard loom in 2007.*

My mother's and father's families immigrated to the United States of America a decade or two before the Peterson family. My father and uncle, like my husband's father and uncle, served in the United States Armed Forces during World War II.

The Petersons pass as American, the *unmarked* category; they do not use words such as "white" or "Caucasian" or some fill-in-the-European-country American to refer to themselves. No one asks them where they are from, or if they do, the response "Indiana" or "America" will suffice.

But my family, like all Asian Americans, still is still seen as recent and temporary visitors from Asia where we will eventually return, no matter how many generations we have lived in the United States as Americans, and some-name-of-an-Asian-country is the only answer that will satisfy.

It matters little what I replied to my father-in-law's question "I assume you're Buddhist?" When, through the years, one of my many aunts or uncles died, my mother- or father-in-law would ask, "I assume they had a Buddhist ceremony?"

Looks-Asian must-be-Buddhist to the end of my days.