



A Family Flower Garden

Raising My Jewish Chinese Daughter

Abby (writer's daughter) at a Chinese New Year festival

Abby was found at the gate of the orphanage complex on the night she was born. Our only artifacts are the handmade cotton clothes she was wearing and a scrap of ledger paper with her birthdate and time scrawled in imperfect Chinese characters.

In third grade last year, my daughter Abby had to do a family origins project for school. She was to answer questions such as “Where do your grandparents come from?” Wanting to simplify her job, I asked do you want to focus on your adoptive family or your biological family?

But to Abby this wasn't an option. She couldn't choose one over the other. A simple family tree wouldn't suffice if she was to honor all her ancestry, Chinese and European. I had tried to simplify the matter, but Abby taught me that she needs to embrace all the aspects of her identity and create not a traditional family tree, but instead a “family flower garden”. And though a beautiful idea, this task proved to be complex.

“I wish I knew something about my birth parents!” she lamented.

“We could be detectives, like Nancy Drew,” I suggested, “and speculate from what we do know.”

We have no actual information about her birth parents. We can only surmise, from the scant information that we have, that her birth parents were poor and probably uneducated. But we can also surmise that they wanted her to have a better life.

For all that I can't give her, there are many more things that I can. I can give her, the stories of my family and my husband's. So I told her about my grandmother, Ruchel (Rose) Winarksy, who, in 1912, at age 14 fled the pogroms in Russia

with her two older sisters and a younger brother, leaving behind their parents, whom they never saw again.

I told her about her paternal great-grandfather and namesake, Abner McCall of Texas, whose mother placed him in a masonic orphanage to receive a good education after his father died in the 1918 flu epidemic.

The sacrifice of parental rights to provide a better future for one's offspring is a familiar theme in immigrant stories. It is something that can deeply resonate with Abby. It is also the Moses story, for Moses too was loved by his adoptive family, but he also learned about his roots. The story took on new resonance for me when I first read it to Abby.

But there is no one story that can encapsulate her history. Raising our Chinese daughter in a Seattle home also means giving her and exposing her to a variety of values and traditions as she herself is the product of many different cultures. She has a secular Jewish mother, an atheist father of Southern Baptist descent, and an older sister (who resembles her parents). How we blend and balance these influences will shape her self-identity.

Our approach has been to give the girls a heaping spoonful of Jewish and Chinese cultures, with a sprinkling of dominant American culture thrown in. When it comes to the holidays, it's a joyful, if exhausting, undertaking: latkes for Chanukah, gingerbread houses for a taste of American tradition, and homemade jiaozi for Chinese New Year's. Fortunately, I like to cook. My childhood family's tradition of going to a Chinese restaurant (the only ones open) on December 25 later morphed into my sisters and I helping our mother prepare a twelve-course Asian holiday meal.



Abby lighting the menorah

My family's love affair with China may have started with cuisine, but there's also an affinity between Chinese and Jewish values. We're both people of the book. One civilization is grounded in the Confucian classics; the other in the Torah and accumulated commentaries. Both place a premium on education. And while both societies can be patriarchal and hierarchical, they share an ideal of the righteous rebel who overcomes a humble beginning to achieve personal and civic success through study, hard work and moral action. In different generations, Jewish and Chinese immigrants have become model minorities in the U.S., and weathered resentment for it. This kinship of values influenced our decision to adopt from China. It also means that when I push

Abby to work harder on an essay or take supplemental math, I can imagine my mother and her birth mother approving.

Here in Seattle, Abby's multi-cultural identity isn't as unique as one might think. It's actually somewhat common to meet children who are both Asian and Jewish, either because they are adopted or bi-racial. During an ancient civilizations class at the middle school, the teacher asked if anyone in the class was Jewish. Only two students raised their hands—one who is Chinese and another girl, who is part Japanese. "Asian domination!" they shouted, and everyone laughed. The fact that these Asian children don't "look Jewish" may spare them from certain assumptions and stereotyping in the greater community, and that may



Lucy, Lia, Abby and Hannah

As a white person, I felt embarrassed to appear before the class as an authority on Chinese New Year, so I invited a Taiwanese mom to join me. She probably would have been asked initially, except for the fact she works full time. For two years now, we've done our presentation together. She talks about the traditions in her family, and I read a book to the kids. As a result of our conversations, she signed her daughter up for the Chinese dance program that Abby and our friends' children Ariana and June are in. Previously, that program catered mostly to adopted children. Step by step, our adopted children are building bridges across communities.

Here in Seattle, we're also most fortunate to belong to a close-knit playgroup of families with children adopted from China. We meet regularly for holidays and outings, and traveled with ten of those families to China on a heritage trip. There are several families with one Jewish parent and a Chinese daughter

Our friends. Julie and Michael, for example, have made a commitment to exploring their daughter Lucy's Asian heritage. Lucy is learning Japanese in school and Mandarin on weekends along with her dad. Together they share Chinese traditions with a diverse community of adoptive, biracial and Chinese-American families at the Mandarin school. Julie acknowledges that emphasizing cultural community over religion means some trade-off, in the lack of a spiritual element. Still, for them, Julie's Jewish and Michael's Presbyterian values are best translated into action. For example, Lucy accompanied her parents to do phone-banking to protect same sex marriage in Washington State. "I hope it was empowering for her to see how beliefs can effect change," Julie reflects.

In contrast, Karen and David share a connection to religious community,

color their experience of what it means to be Jewish. For them it will not be a label, but a matter of personal choice.

I want to give my children a stronger sense of Jewish identity than I had. My family, an assimilated family in the Pacific Northwest, rarely went to synagogue, and I didn't go to Sunday school, but we practiced the Jewish tradition of activism. My grandmother Rose was a seamstress and labor organizer, my mother was a dedicated community organizer for children's welfare, and I have been active in Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation. The aspects of Judaism that I connect to most are its ethical underpinnings and emphasis on social reform, rather than religion or ritual.

When my older daughter Hannah reached middle school, I signed her up for a Jewish studies class, focusing on history and Torah interpretation. Now, at age 13, Hannah meets monthly with a rabbi to prepare for an alternative-style bat mitzvah. I hope both my girls will experience this important rite of passage, which I did not have growing up.

But to only speak of her Jewish connections is to ignore an important part of who she is. Bridging these identities is important to me. I want Abby to feel a part of the broader Asian-American culture, and not just our adoptive subgroup. After I did a Chanukah presentation in Abby's classroom, her teacher asked me if I would do one for Chinese New Year.



Playgroups' trip to China, pictured in front of the Temple of Heaven

despite coming from different faiths (she Congregationalist, he Jewish Conservative), and want to pass that on to their children. “For me it’s important to carve out time to talk about the sacred, acknowledge the miracle of life, and talk about the hard questions of right and wrong,” Karen explains. They joined a Reform synagogue and both their girls take Sunday school classes. For the girls, embracing their Jewish identity has been a way to connect with David’s family, which is observant. June loves the singing, while Ariana just loves meeting people, and both like learning languages. They also take Chinese dance class, where they learn Mandarin, and are active in our playgroup. “Our kids get overbooked,” Karen laments. “Something has to go.” They don’t play soccer.

Nancy and Steven, also an interfaith couple, take a middle ground approach.

Nancy and her Chinese adopted daughter Lia attend a Jewish worship that incorporates elements of Buddhism. For Nancy, Buddhism provides a spiritual depth she found lacking in mainstream American synagogues. Yet the meditative practice of Buddhism is fundamental to Judaism, especially Chassidism. “It’s about mindfulness and presence, how we treat each other and what’s important in life,” Nancy offers. At Lia’s school, interestingly, there are many Asian kids, but few Jewish ones, so Lia likes to highlight her Jewishness as something that makes her special.

The extent to which our Chinese daughters self-identify as Jewish is influenced by the amount of family involvement. June and Ariana strongly identify with being Jewish, more so, it seems, than Abby and Lucy. “Still, if asked,” their mom Karen says,

“my daughters would say they are ‘Chinese’ first.”

Our Chinese-Jewish adopted daughters have a foot in both cultures, but how fully do they belong in either?

A friend, who is Orthodox, once suggested that Abby could “convert” to Judaism, but in the more liberal-leaning Jewish communities, there is never any question that my adopted daughter is Jewish. At their Reform synagogue, Karen notes, “everyone’s very accepting.”

Integration into the Asian community seems a little trickier for our girls. Several of our playgroup families have at least one Asian parent, and there are connections through Mandarin teachers and friends they make at school. Still, when it comes to acceptance in the non-adoptive Asian



Abby's Family Garden

community, there can be cultural and socio-economic differences to bridge.

For example, Lia rides the bus to school with several girls from Chinese immigrant families who live in the predominantly Asian International District. They braid each other's hair, and at recess, Lia bounces back and forth between separate circles of immigrant girls and white girls. Still, it took years of invitations, Nancy explains, before the immigrant girls finally came to Lia's birthday party. Arranging playdates was even harder. Their parents work long hours, and the girls might stay after school with a grandparent who doesn't speak English. One time, when an immigrant friend did come over for a play date, she came with several siblings and brought food.

My sister and her husband, who was born and raised in China, are both China

historians, and their 3-year-old son is bilingual, so there was a compelling reason to learn Mandarin. I signed both the girls and myself up for Saturday Mandarin classes when they were little, although only Abby and I are continuing. She grumbles about it, and her sister takes her side, but she likes having a language that half the family can't understand. The other day, she even tried to tell me in Chinese her idea for daddy's birthday present.

Embracing our children's multiple identities is about more than latkes and mooncakes. Comparing experiences reveals there's no one way to raise a Chinese child in a Jewish home. But what we have in common is that we all do it thoughtfully. And while Abby and our friends' children may find that they will never have all the questions about her earliest beginnings answered,

they understand a great amount more about tolerance than most. Our children have the capacity to be spokespersons for a more tolerant world—a world in which we celebrate similarities, respect differences, and can see the beauty of every individual's family flower garden. ♪



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