

## Multicultural Mayhem: Kosher Pigs, Jewish Lawyers and Chinese Gangsters



*The Jewish Family*

**T**elevision producer Moon Cho isn't Chinese and she isn't Jewish either, neither is co-writer and director Eric Patton but together they are the force behind *Kosher Pig*. (Is it even kosher put those two words together?)

For the producers, though, this inherent paradox in their sitcom's title perfectly represents the complications involved

in attempting to bring together two disparate cultures. And what if, like character Joy Cohen, these two seemingly disparate cultures were both critical parts of her own complex identity? Joy Cohen is in most ways like any other Jewish girl raised in the suburbs of Los Angeles and studying to be a lawyer, except, she happens to have a bit of an Asian look about her. Adopted at birth by her oh-so stereotypical Los

Angeles Jewish parents (no offense to my in-laws), Chinese culture is entirely foreign to Joy. She makes gefilte fish, not shao mai (very definitely, very treife Chinese dumplings).

The sitcom follows Joy Cohen as she searches for her biological parents. Cohen dreams of bringing together these two families and making peace with her own multicultural identity.

To Cohen's surprise however, her biological family is not living in a rural Chinese countryside, but rather also are in LA and are the owners of a Chinese Restaurant named "The Joy Luck Pig" (yes, this play on Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* is almost too silly to believe).

Ok, so where is this going? A kosher pig, The Joy Luck Pig Restaurant, a Jewish lawyer, even Chinese gangsters. First of all, the show is funny but jokes aside, there are themes and issues behind the laughs. As Patton explains, "We tried to focus primarily on the comedy, but that's not to say we neglect the necessary pathos. Without an emotional connection you'll never care for the characters, so we took those moments to build a connection to the audience."

According to Cho, multiculturalism and blending cultures are very common themes in American sitcoms now. Patton furthers this idea by saying that multiculturalism is the ultimate American theme, as it is a country of immigrants and a veritable 'melting pot'. As for the Chinese-Jewish connection, neither Cho nor Patton was aware of how hot a topic this combination is now, but they both found they were incredibly easy to blend. As Patton learned, "They may appear to be very disparate but they're incredibly similar. They are both deeply rooted in tradition and have a resounding respect for older generations, incredibly tight families and strong family values. Not to mention that both cultures have an almost ritual relationship with their food." Cho adds in that there's a shared emphasis in the value of education and achieving success. (Also, quite simply, we Jews really do love Chinese food.)

In order to research the cultures, the multiculturalism in Los Angeles itself provided much of the context and



readily available information as well as interactions with both cultures. The team also relied on the resources available at the Skirball Cultural Center but found their own cast itself was an invaluable resource drawing on information from actors Jim Lau, Elizabeth Sung, Tammy Kaitz and John Pleshette. Patton explains that through the cast, "the characters and their traditions really became more three-dimensional...The idea was to set those stereotypes up in a pilot episode so that as the series progresses we can deconstruct some of those stereotypes and the audience can learn the depth of the characters throughout an entire series."

Again jokes aside, her nuclear family structure suddenly must also be altered in order to make room for her biological parents, creating a most unusual arrangement and an unconventional family. Ultimately, Cho suggests that if there is a message, the show is about self-acceptance. The character Joy Cohen's struggles to reconcile the

seemingly incongruent parts of her own identity are not dissimilar to those of others with multiple layers of ethnicity. The reality is, though, that Joy Cohen as an Asian-Jew must repeatedly be forced to defend her own 'Judaism', something Jews of European descent would never have to do. In kosher shops, when buying her matzah for Passover, she would be faced with a barrage of questions. She would constantly have to prove that she was Jewish just because of how she looks. The world would see her as Chinese and yet she would have no cultural context for her Chinese side. The irony is that, in some respects, life is simpler for her parents in that they fit well into Jewish stereotypes and her biological parents who fit so well into Chinese stereotypes. They don't have to deal with the complexities of multicultural identity that she struggles with.

For a show that 'focuses primarily on the comedy' these are some weighty issues to tackle. ✎