

Confessions of a Secret Asian Man

Sándor Lau

If you really want to understand, it all comes down to the stacking of the firewood.

My father has always been my hero, but it took me some time to figure it out. One of my jobs as a kid was to help Dad with firewood, which he insisted on stacking in a neat pile. You might forgive me if at the time I could not see the logic of neatly stacking wood, ONLY TO BURN IT! But that's my dad.

He brushed his teeth with his left hand to increase dexterity. Read the whole encyclopedia before he was ten. Could do a perfect three-point turn with a trailer attached to the back of the truck. He always insisted on doing everything the hard way, but never lost his temper. Except once. My brother and I were watching Saturday morning cartoons and there was a hilarious show with a buck-toothed, four-eyed Chinese guy who had us in stitches. I could tell Dad was fuming when he walked in because he did something I had never seen before. He raised his voice. All he said was, "I'm a Chinese guy. And you're Chinese guys too."

If you understand about Elizabeth, Colorado and the 80s and Reagan's America, you might also forgive me for reaching the age of six and having to be told I was Chinese.

You see, I've always been a secret Asian man, because I don't look very Chinese. My brother and I both turned out fair skinned with brown hair. And apart from the woman in the hospital who in 1975 demanded to know where my mother got her adopted Vietnamese baby, most people looking me in the face never even guess I'm Chinese.

My great grandparents on my mother's side wisely thought 1913 was a fine year to leave Eastern Europe and migrated from Hungary to the United

States. On my father's side, my great grandparents took the popular 1880s option of leaving the life of farmer peasants in Guangdong to become farmer peasants in Hawaii.

But I grew up in Elizabeth, Colorado, among pickup trucks, rattlesnakes and lots of empty cans of Coors beer. By the late 70s, the variety of cowboys who actually shot each other had become extinct. But among the 1000 or so residents of Elizabeth, there were still a few who brought their six shooters to the Wagon Wheel Saloon and put some holes in the ceiling after downing a few too many cans of Coors. I'm sure you can relate.

It may come as no surprise to you that we had to drive an hour to Denver to buy a bag of rice or have a mouthful of dim sum. Our closest connection to the old country was our relatives in Hawaii, and even they mistook us for haoles. It took us years just to figure out they were speaking English and years after that to figure out what they were saying through their thick pidgin accents that sounded a lot more like South Auckland than Charlie Chan.

Dr. Sun Yat Sen was once asked what the most important effect of the Franco-Prussian war was, to which he responded, "It's too soon to tell." Back in the 80s, it was too soon for me to tell that my own buck teeth, four eyes, and straight-A report cards had anything to do with the Chinese guy in the cartoon. It was certainly too soon to tell that many of my schoolmates found me just as hilarious as the Chinese guy in the cartoon, for many of the same reasons. Not that I noticed, as every waking hour but Saturday morning, I was busy studying anyway. In later years, I would wonder if I was not a banana,

but an egg, white on the outside, yellow in the middle.

Oklahoma was previously known as the Indian Territory because that's where the US government sent the tangata whenua as soon as the wind stopped blowing, grass stopped growing and water stopped flowing. They figured it was the last place white people wanted to live – until everywhere else got crowded and they discovered oil where the wind comes sweeping down the plain. Fresh out of high school, it was certainly the last place I wanted to live. But with the land grab over, the University of Oklahoma instituted a new scholarship grab to bring in straight A-students, regardless of whether they had buck teeth or four eyes.

My ancestors had come across thousands of miles in a leaky boat on their own trail of tears so I could get an education, and I could hardly begrudge them travelling 600 miles more for it, even if it did mean landing in the buckle of the Bible Belt.

At the University of Oklahoma, I joined the Asian-American Student Association, but even they could not save me from the hordes of frat boys and Christian fundamentalists who dominated the rest of campus. Only the study abroad office could do that.

In exchange for doing hard time in Oklahoma, I got to retrace the journeys of my own ancestors and a lot of other people's, studying in Mexico, Spain, France, and in the summer of 1997, China.

The US administration has given us a few things to be ashamed of in recent years, Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, depleted uranium and extraordinary rendition. But if you were with me in Shanghai in the summer of 1997, you would understand yet another human rights violation. Never, ever, unleash a study tour of frat boys and Christian fundamentalists tanked on Qingdao beer onto the civilian population of China.

It would have been natural at this stage for me to want to identify more with Chinese people from the homeland as I certainly couldn't identify with my classmates. But if you want to make a Chinese person laugh. I mean really laugh. I mean laugh like an American kid watching a four-eyed buck toothed Chinaman on Saturday morning cartoons, go to

China as a fourth-generation Chinese-American and tell them you are Chinese.

While I didn't discover any ancient Chinese secrets on my trip, I did start to understand more about the stacking of the firewood. My ancestors came from an ethnic minority group called the Hakka. That's with two Ks.

My great-grandmother had come to Hawaii in the years following the Franco-Prussian war, and worked digging pineapple. One day out in the field, she put the pick through her foot. After which, she poured kerosene over the wound to cauterize it, wrapped it tightly in a cloth, and went back to work, "Because there was work to be done." I remember people in China saying, "Hakka? Oh yes, very hard working people."

My own hard work during the Oklahoman exile had paid off in the form of a US Fulbright scholarship to study filmmaking at the University of Auckland. As my thesis in film school, I did a documentary, Behaviours of the Backpacker, in which I did not put a pick through my foot, but I did walk from Auckland to Cape Reinga.

In the winter of 2002, it was too soon to tell how many people would give me their stories and put their souls on tape for me. But I did know I would get something by walking that could not be had any other way. I also knew that by stacking the firewood neatly... I mean walking 500 kilometres, I would discover something about myself I couldn't learn by taking a lift.

Now I've finished a new film called Squeegee Bandit. It's about a tough Māori guy from South Auckland who's into performance art and street theatre. Which is to say he washes car windows at traffic lights. It's about hip-hop, homelessness, the Treaty of Waitangi and finding God.

On the surface, it's about as far away from cowboys, rattlesnakes, Coors Beer, dim sum, Sun Yat-Sen, the Franco-Prussian War and digging pineapple as you can possibly get. But I am convinced that autobiography is the only genre out there. With Behaviours of the Backpacker and Squeegee Bandit, the most passionate reactions I get from people are when they see themselves in the characters and the story. I look at these films now,

and ultimately see stories about a kid from Colorado who had to learn to do things the hard way, who had to come all the way to New Zealand to figure out his father was his hero, and who wanted to see something more than four-eyed buck-toothed Chinese cartoon characters on television.

Sándor Lau was born in 1975 in South Bend, Indiana, USA, and grew up in Elizabeth, the pearl of Colorado's eastern plains... A full scholarship brought Sándor to the University of Oklahoma. He quickly decided to take full advantage of the university's study abroad programme. After spending half of his undergraduate education studying in Mexico, Spain, France, and China, he taught English in Taiwan where he amazingly survived the traffic and paraglided for the first time. In 2000, Sándor received a US Fulbright scholarship to study at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and attended film school there. Sándor continues to live in Auckland, making films and writing for audiences in New Zealand and around the world. This article is based on his presentation at the 2006 Going Bananas Conference held in Auckland.

- Squeegee Bandit trailer:
www.squeegeebandit.com/trailer.html
- Behaviours of the Backpacker clip (and to get the DVD):
www.nzshortfilm.com/film,285.sm
- Sándor Lau website: www.sandorlau.net