

China Wedding

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Subject: Wedding
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Hi, there, thank you all for coming to Shenzhen for wedding. Enclosed please find relevant wedding information sheet. We just talked with the wedding planner, and here is the program of the show:

- On June 19, I get up early in morning to “pick up” Mei
- have a little tea ceremony at Mei’s parents’ place
- 10am, have a wedding walk at the Pavilion hotel.
- 11 am, reception and welcoming
- 12N, banquet

Anyone wants to get up early can catch the 10 AM wedding moment.

Signed
Zhigang

When I advertised for a roommate in San Francisco, I expected someone my own age (52), gender (F), race (Caucasian), not a twenty-three year post-doc student just off the plane from China. He hadn’t expected me either – he expected to live with his sister Xi, who had been in the States for eighteen years. If not with her, then with other Chinese students. But Xi, the oldest child in their family of four, took one look at me, the oldest of seven and more than twice her brother's age, and saw a perfect replacement for herself.

I spent years trying to pronounce his name, Zhigang. *Jji gang?* I asked. He repeated his name. *Jir gang?* I wanted very much to pronounce his name correctly, to show him I knew how to treat foreigners respectfully. *Chi gang? Shigang?* Zhigang continued to work with me. *Zhi gang.* That's with the third tone, the straight tone, where you slow your words down a millisecond and stop so that you don't cruise down or trill up, inadvertently inflecting to a question mark. I told myself, "Keep the *gang* level!" *Zhi gang.* Zhigang nodded. I knew I had missed again. Finally, in our fifth year as roommates, he said he didn't even know how to pronounce his own name anymore and I had to stop.

When I met him, I had only vague notions about the Chinese – Mao, the Cultural Revolution, Tiananmen Square, Three Gorges Dam – none of which led me to think I had found a roommate who would order us student season tickets to symphony and listen to opera – Western, not Chinese – as he went to bed at night. Who would play tennis and take singing lessons with me, who chowed down French sweet breads and Persian *perdaplow*. In short, I had no idea that a twenty-five year old Chinese man would be the perfect roommate for me.

During the seven years we lived together, he bought a car, then I taught him to drive. He got us DSL, a paper shredder, and a shiny blue microwave that looked like a Mac computer. I taught him about croissants, Stilton cheese and how to play scales on the piano. He worked on a dissertation, I wrote a book. His boss was difficult, mine was crazy; his lab relocated, I started working at home. His dad moved to the United States, then his mother. My boyfriend had open heart surgery, my mother, a stroke. Zhigang and I lived together longer than I had lived with any roommate or lover.

From the beginning, he worried about settling down. At ESL class, a crush on a Japanese woman bloomed, but Zhigang couldn't pry her loose from her seven girlfriends. The next year, a Chinese woman arrived at our party with a chaperone – for chastity I thought but, no, the chaperone was assessing suitability, because only two nights later, Zhigang and his new girlfriend were singing “Moon River” together in the shower, surely, I thought, the basis for a wonderful relationship. However, their visas did not align. The next year, he flew to Italy to meet a friend's friend. Photos show a smiling couple at the Coliseum but Zhigang wanted to try Italian food and she wanted Chinese. “Who would eat Chinese in Rome?” he asked. “It means large disagreements later.” At home he told me if something didn't happen soon, he would let his parents find someone. But something did – Mei, a thirty year old Chinese-born Chinese.

In a picture I took for Mei's parents in China, we tried to make Zhigang look like a serious contender for their only child – he sat straight, didn't smile and wore a shirt and tie. They said he was fat. He found a good job in Princeton. They said, “San Francisco's a good place for Chinese, not New Jersey. Princeton's not even on our map.” When they visited, they criticized him, but he wasn't perturbed, “The girl's parents have the right to say anything. Besides Mei is thirty. Her parents are nervous.” Just the same, before they arrived, he drank several cans of Slimfast. When they left, Mei said, “They are not totally satisfied. That's okay, the parents are never satisfied.”

My neighborhood in San Francisco is mainly Chinese, both immigrants like Zhigang and American Born Chinese – “*ABCs*,” Zhigang explained. The local supermarket on Irving Street has a tank of live fish and every one of the fifteen restaurants in two blocks sells dim sum or tapioca ball drinks or ducks hanging on a clothesline or all three. My Chinese neighbors dress in jeans, not Mao jackets, live in apartments like mine, and shop on the same street. In other words, they seem like me.

A few years ago, Zhigang invited my boyfriend Bernie and me to a Chinese Baptist church down the street to hear a master on the *pipa*, a traditional four stringed pear-shaped lute. During the minister’s introduction, the audience swiveled their heads to the back of the church and smiled. Eagerly joining in, so did Bernie and I. Heads swiveled forward, ours followed suit. It was quite a surprise to us that the *pipa* player was not only a renowned musician but a missionary for Christ. Although I didn’t understand anything except *Coca-Cola*, *okay* and *cowboy*, I knew she was testifying because she cried, she laughed, she smiled, her testimonial had been carefully honed. After fifteen minutes of talking, she played for three, then testified some more. A woman cried, a man slept, and several of us escaped at half time.

“I’m so sorry,” Zhigang apologized. “I didn’t know it was going to be religious.” The minister, he said, had bragged about how prestigious the concert was, so prestigious, the minister said, “that foreign guests have joined us.” That was when everyone had turned to look at us. Zhigang looked too. “I didn’t see any foreigners,” he said. “Then I realized, ‘Oh, the minister must mean M and Bernie.’”

Zhigang had lived with me long enough that he didn't see me as Caucasian. I had lived with him long enough not to expect the exotic, in fact, so long I didn't expect anything different when I thought about going to a wedding in China. I knew him and because of that I thought I knew the Chinese.

Before the wedding my three friends and I traveled on our own for two weeks. All the Chinese had black hair, either dyed or natural, and everyone stared at my friend's white hair. At a restaurant, we couldn't read the bill. A waitress tried to show us but the Chinese count on their fingers differently than Americans. At another, I pulled a Mandarin dictionary out of my pocket and the waiter pantomimed wanting to see it. He spent five minutes oohing and aahing and looking up words, but when I finally got it back, I still didn't know the Mandarin word for the fish I wanted to order.

No doubt, this was why Zhigang begged me to take a tour. Lots of Americans go to China and don't take tours, I said, especially in Beijing and Shanghai. A tour is good, he said. Did he think I couldn't manage? Finally he confessed, "You have so much trouble making decisions about what to wear, what computer to buy, all small things. If you can't make up your mind, it's going to be hard in China. A lot of people and they push." I was touched by his concern.

But he *didn't* know me that well. He had never traveled with me and didn't know how adaptable I was, just as I didn't know how fierce his way of expressing himself would seem in China. When he had lived with me, he said thank you constantly, his

inflection conveying a perfect balance of gratitude and pleasure without obsequiousness.

“Chinese people must be very polite,” I said to him, “saying thank you all the time.”

Because of Zhigang, we traveled around China saying shie shie – thank you –

everywhere but when I told him this later, he said, “Chinese people never say thank you.

I heard Americans say it and decided I would say it to fit in.”

We all want a wedding in a different culture to be so exotic it will make our hearts beat like the little birds old Chinese men carry in cages when they go outside to play cards, and at the same time, we want a wedding to confirm the universal in human love.

I bragged I was going to China, not on a tour, but for a wedding! Images from movies and museums fast forwarded in my brain. An exotic wedding would be so crowded you could barely squeeze through the door. Quiet. In a wood temple with incense, bronze pots and bells. Noisy. A bulky wedding dress with elaborate details, or maybe a simple kimono. Chinese opera, tea, food that Westerners wouldn't eat (chicken tendons or horsemeat) with Chinese broccoli and bok choy. The best food of your life with Chinese broccoli and bok choy. Smells of rice vinegar and hoi sin sauce. Priests with long beards in pointed yellow hats, lots of bowing, no skin. I knew that communism had affected this picture, but, to a former hippie with friends who wore Mao jackets, Chinese communism itself seemed exotic.

But asking for a traditional wedding in China was like expecting a wedding entourage in the States to wear pioneer dresses and pilgrims' hats. This wedding wasn't

in Beijing with emperors and concubines in the Forbidden City. It wasn't in the Shanghai of gangsters, and it wasn't in rural China. It was in Shenzhen, a small unimportant village developed in 1980 to compete with Hong Kong. It was a city I couldn't find on a map despite its population of fourteen million people – because in comparison with other cities, a spot with fourteen million is just that insignificant on a Chinese map.

We stayed at a Chinese businessman's hotel just around the corner from Wal-Mart. The hotel overlooked a high rise apartment building that looked as if the Beijing *hutong* with people cooking outside, sharing bathrooms at the end of winding alleys, and staying up on hot nights playing cards, had become vertical. Residents planted greenery, hung birds in cages, cooked, dried laundry and played dice on every balcony.

When I spotted Zhigang waiting for us at the Shenzhen hotel, my spirits soared. I was so grateful to see him I offered him one of the three remaining ounces of 70% dark chocolate I had carried from San Francisco. "What would happen," Zhigang grinned, "if you would run out of chocolate in China and have no emergency reserves and not be able to speak Chinese?" Having lived with me for seven years, he knew what trauma this would cause. He took it anyway.

For a moment, talking about chocolate in English calmed me. It was a relief to speak English to someone with whom I felt more comfortable than my traveling companions. They had come to China because of me and I thought I needed to figure out China for them. Talking with Zhigang was as if he and I were standing by the cupboard in our flat near Irving Street, suspended in time, deciding how much chocolate we could consume and not get fat.

A rush of people fly down the stairs, Jun Jun and his wife and Jacob and Sarah and Ding Ding and Feng and Li, all people I know but I am so overwhelmed I can't be sure what name goes with what face. Zhigang's mother hugs me and laughs, his sister Xi smiles. Suddenly, rather than Cantonese or Mandarin, I hear English from Chinese people. It startles me, as if I have switched on the subtitles at a movie.

I nod at everyone, careful not to say a name. Smiling, I understand why, when Zhigang's parents visited San Francisco, they smiled and nodded at everything I said. The only relative missing was Zhigang's ninety-three year old great auntie in New York, really his grandmother, well, actually his adopted grandmother. Zhigang's grandparents gave their son to her so she, the unmarried scholar, would have someone to look after her in her old age. It's complicated.

Over and over, I asked Zhigang his mother's first name, forgetting that the Chinese use last names. Both Zhigang and the guidebooks had said so, but I couldn't remember what I had heard *or* read. Guidebooks are great after you come home – that's when what you read makes sense.

After everyone left, I mentally reviewed the family stories I had heard. The family faced the Chinese revolution with doctors on the father's side and landowners on the mother's, both bad. Jun Jun and the family were first ordered north. When wall posters denounced him, the family, fearing for their lives, fled to relatives in the south where no one else knew them. When Zhigang's parents were assigned to work day and night in factories and on farms, eight year old Xi was left in charge. One morning, carrying Zhigang swaddled on her back, she went to buy eggs. A woman stopped her. "The baby's turning blue," she said. Strapping the baby in tightly, Xi had nearly smothered Zhigang.

“Mei,” I said to Zhigang’s fiancée before I left for China, “everyone wants to know if the wedding will be traditional.”

“There’s no such thing as traditional in China,” she said. “It’s pretty much like American weddings, about food.” Which, in fact, isn’t the case in the States.

In fact, Zhigang and Mei had married nine months before at city hall in San Francisco where I had stood up for them. I had thought we should celebrate with a party or at least a fancy lunch, but no. A croissant at the bakery? No. Instead we went to the Civic Center Coffee Shop and ordered a pastry wrapped in plastic. The truth was there wasn’t a party because this was a marriage for legal reasons, not a wedding.

Even though the marriage wasn’t important, it wasn’t so unimportant that Zhigang hadn’t spent time selecting an auspicious day in the Chinese calendar and he did the same for the wedding. “People often get married on Saturdays,” he said, “but Saturday June 18 is an auspicious day for getting a haircut. Sunday, June 19, is lucky for getting married.” Like the symbols above the Chinese stores in San Francisco that mean Long Life or Double Happiness, it’s a superstition, but if you don’t do it by the book, you’ll never know for sure if that’s why your marriage went sour. The wedding date was so auspicious the best man couldn’t come because *his* brother decided to get married the same day.

Before I went to China, I read about emperors who bled the country dry; the Taipeng Rebellion in the 1850s and 1860s – 20 million dead in fifteen years; the great famine of 1876-1879 – seven to twenty million dead; the hope with Nationalist Sun Yatsen (1912), dashed by Chiang KaiShek and his thugs (1925); the optimism of Mao (1949), but then the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1958); the murderous great leap forward (1959); another famine; the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976); and, finally, Mao's death in 1976.

You had to assume survivors were deeply scarred. In the past seventy years, they had seen parents beheaded or buried alive and neighbors starve. Former Red Guards who had beaten teachers to death were now trying to make sense of their actions.

Zhigang told me he was lucky to be born at the right time in the history of China. You don't hear that sentiment in America – we think the individual creates the future and we don't pick auspicious days for our weddings. The Chinese see history as a circle, always returning to its starting point. Zhigang knew that he could have been born twenty years before, smack in the middle of the Cultural Revolution, he could have been banished to the country, or in the middle of a great famine when he or some of his family certainly would have perished.

At the wedding, I watched Zhigang, Mei and their parents parade from table to table. I knew about the grandfather who had been a street entertainer; the great grandfather who was a doctor to the emperor; about a grandfather who studied law in Illinois where he had an affair and exemplified the Chinese fable in which every event has the possibility of good or bad: Probably Zhigang's father was the son chosen to care for his great auntie because he was the son most similar to his grandfather, whom his

grandmother had not forgiven for the Illinois liaison. Grandfather goes to America, good; has affair, bad; wife assigns son to Great Auntie, good for Great Auntie; Auntie stuck in New York during Cultural Revolution, bad, or maybe good; Cultural Revolution ends, good, education system in shambles, bad; Father Jun sends daughter Xi to Great Auntie for education, good; fifteen years later, because Xi is here, Zhigang comes to graduate school in San Francisco, good. At least for me.

I looked at Zhigang's half-American niece Sarah, flopped over a chair, at her brother Jacob nibbling at sautéed scallop and sliced conch. Seated at the English-speaking table of Italians, Asians and Americans, I watched my sister Cathy and her husband eat dishes chosen, not for taste, though they were delicious, but for names that boded well for marriage: the word for the fish we had, for instance, was the same word as abundance.

A blend of all the history of this family and of China had brought about this wedding. At weddings in the States, I don't see my country's history on display. At most, I might idly consider the bride's and groom's pasts. This wedding was as much about Chinese society as it was about Zhigang and Mei. That's why they didn't celebrate their marriage at the San Francisco Civic Center – it wasn't important. What was, was the *wedding* because it celebrated the continuation of Zhigang's and Mei's newly joined families, their place in society and China's place in the world. No wonder Zhigang felt lucky to be born now.

Two days later, Zhigang, Mei, my three friends and I went on the honeymoon to Yunnan Province, where the six of us, even Zhigang and Mei, looked forward to seeing the exotic Chinese minorities who lived there.