

Pilgrimage of the Spirit: Connecting with my Ancestors

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I would like to share a personal story, but it is very complicated. The complication is not with the story, but rather with me. I will preface this by saying that I am a Chinese-Vietnamese-Khmer-American, complicated by the fact that these three ethnicities traditionally tend to have feelings of animosity toward one another. Now do you see the complication? My family came to America with what Asian-American scholars call the “third wave” of Asian immigration into the United States. It was this third wave that contributed to a kind of cultural, linguistic, political, religious, and economic diversity never before experienced by Asian-Americans nor by many other countries worldwide. My father, my mother, along with my three sisters and older brother all came as refugees in 1981.

Because I was the youngest, four years old, I was the only member of my family to be able to fully “assimilate.” Hence, growing up I never had a problem with identifying myself as an American. I did not know what a refugee was and did not really want to know. I grew up thinking that Chinese, Vietnamese, and Khmer were all different terms for the same thing. My parents spoke these three languages interchangeably and knowing that we understood Chinese and Vietnamese well, they would speak in their secret Khmer language that made no sense to us. The majority of my classmates in elementary, junior high, and high school were ethnic

Vietnamese or Sino-Vietnamese, therefore, my identification as being Vietnamese was smooth. Chinese was also easy because we lived by a Chinatown in Los Angeles. But where did Khmer fit into the picture?

While it was easy and comfortable to think of myself as an American during my childhood, this all changed when I entered college. I took a class on Asian religions, which would impact my future in a dramatic way. I had an intimate affinity with the lectures on Asian religions in China, Vietnam, and Cambodia. I wanted to know more about Cambodian Buddhism, about Chinese Daoism, about Vietnamese new religions. I could not get enough of it. I soon changed my major and became inextricably attached to the study of east and southeast Asian histories, cultures, languages, and religions. Learning about Asian religions provided me with a way of connecting to the Asian dimensions of my personhood. This was the start of a long journey as I struggled to fit together the pieces of my family's history and genealogy, made more difficult by the inter-generational and language barriers between my parents and me. I could not interview my mom and do extensive ethnographic research on my family. Amazingly, everything changed with a pilgrimage my mom shared with me when she returned to Cambodia after twenty-five plus years in the United States.

For several months my mother had had nightmares about my ancestors as hungry, homeless ghosts. She dreamt that my ancestral grandparents were living in a shattered house with no roof and leaky walls. After this one particular dream, my mother went to Chinatown and bought a doll-sized model of a paper house, miniature paper clothing, paper money, paper gold and silver, and real food, intended as offerings for our ancestors. But she waited until three in the morning to perform the ritual so that the neighbors would not complain and call the fire

department as she transformed the essence of her offerings into smoke. My ancestors must have received these gifts, since my mother stopped having dream visits from them. In my cultures this ritual is an expression of a spiritual belief that the world of the living and the world of the dead are not dichotomies, but rather, a shift of being and a new becoming.

My ancestors all died in the Killing Fields of Cambodia. Their spirits became inauspicious because they did not have a proper burial and because my parents (and my siblings and I) were not living up to our spiritual-religious responsibilities. We were not making sure that they had all the essentials they needed in the other realm to be comfortable and happy. I had assumed that our ancestors' spirits would understand since we were now Americans.

Shortly after that mid-night ceremony my mother decided that she would return to Cambodia to provide my ancestors, all sixty-some spirits, the memorial they had been denied during the Killing Fields. In addition, she had heard rumors that maybe, just maybe, one aunt and some of her children had survived. She also wanted to visit Vietnam, to look for friends who had extended their kindness to my family with food and shelter during our less fortunate days. I accompanied my mom on the trip with much enthusiasm.

The trip to Cambodia with my mother was the most profound travel experience I have ever had (and hopefully will not be the last). On our eighteen-hour plane ride to Cambodia I was able to ask my mom endless questions about my grandparents and her life in China before she had moved to Cambodia; then I asked about her life in Cambodia before our flight to America. I found that I was not just Vietnamese by birth, because that's where I had been born, but because my fraternal grandmother was Vietnamese and my fraternal grandfather was Chinese-Khmer. I do not exactly know how to explain the emotion, but I now feel as though I am making progress

in my quest to dis/uncover my ethnic and cultural identities. My mom's Khmer came back to her and it seems as though twenty-five-plus years of being away did not hinder her linguistic abilities. She took me to the house my family had lived in before I was born. It is in front of a major historic Buddhist temple and the central marketplace in Phnom Penh. Today, it is a rice store.

The most amazing part of the trip was a reunion with long-lost relatives that I had thought were all dead as a result of the Killing Fields. When my mom went to a Buddhist temple to make an offering and donation, she noticed the name of one of the donors on the wall. She was intrigued by the name and thought that perhaps it was a mistake. She asked the recorder about that person and described details about him to the recorder. The recorder wanted to know why she was asking all these questions and she explained that they were related and that she'd just traveled a long way from America to perform a merit transfer ceremony for her ancestors. The name she had come across was the name of my uncle, a second cousin. The recorder gave her an address and my mom immediately went there to find my great aunt (seventy plus years old), who speechlessly embraced her and cried.

Interestingly, my great aunt had had a dream about my mother looking for her several months before this incident. My aunt's revelation did not surprise my mom because several months ago, after she had booked the tickets, she had told herself several times that she was going to look for my great aunt in Cambodia. The day before she had gone to the temple she had actually looked for my aunt in areas where old friends had claimed to have seen her, but she had had no success. We stayed with my great aunt and each night she and her three surviving daughters (my aunts) came into our room and told us stories about their experiences in the labor

camps and on the Killing Fields. My great aunt had had twelve children, but only five had survived.

I visited the Killing Fields alone because my aunts and my mom wanted nothing to do with it. I was reminded of an article that two of my professors, Prof. Vivian-Lee Nyitray and Prof. June O'Connor co-authored for the *Facing Death* exhibit at the UC Riverside Museum of Photography. In it they said, “Facing death is a fact of life made real to many by disease and old age. We sadly acknowledge that death from old age is natural, just as we reluctantly admit that disease can also demand acceptance of death in the end. But deliberative, intentional, and torturous cruelty—as evoked in the killing of teenagers whose chief crime may have been to leave their military or factory posts in order to return to their parents, or in the slaughter of infants and children to forestall their future vengeance—bespeaks deaths we rightly refuse to accept.”

My mom organized two grand Buddhist merit transfer ceremonies for my ancestors: the first for my father's family, the second for her family. The food that she brought for the ceremony fed a group of elderly and young Cambodians as well as a temple of monks. The merit from this act of charity was sent to my ancestors to assist them in the afterlife. My mom also added her teacher's name to our list of receivers because she had recently dreamt of his spirit being hungry and helpless. Coincidentally just a month before our trip to Cambodia, my Cambodian family had sent two of their teenagers to attend school in America, in the land of great opportunities where dreams are no longer dreams, but rather a goal to strive for. Leakana (the older sister) and Serviuth (the younger brother) are now living with my mom in Los Angeles as they go to school and adjust to life in America.

I have a sense that my ancestors are responsible for all these incredible events in my family's life these past few months. I have personally connected with my grandparents and extended ancestral kinfolks. This experience was a pilgrimage of my spirit, of my mother's spirit, a confirmation of who I am as "Asian," as "Chinese," as "Khmer," and as "Vietnamese," made possible by my ancestors trying to establish relations with me, their American kin.

My mom told me that our ancestors' spirits must have been protecting our family during our treacherous flight from war-torn Southeast Asia. After this trip, I felt the spirits of my ancestors, my Vietnamese grandmother, my Chinese-Khmer grandparents, smiling at me. I finally understand my family's connection to Cambodia. Cambodia is no longer that place where my parents met and got married; it is no longer that place where all my immediate ancestors were murdered. It is my Cambodia. We did not make it to Vietnam on this trip as my mom had planned, but she's making plans for a pilgrimage to Vietnam and China.

To be continued!