

FAMILY FEUD

MEMORIES OF AN EXPLOSIVE SPRING FESTIVAL

by George Ding

Spring Festival is a time for family and blowing shit up, but since I grew up in Virginia without extended family or illegal fireworks, Chinese New Year got lost between the fanfare of Christmas and the narcissistic revelry of my birthday. Kowtowing to my parents for a red envelope became a formality – like a lapsed Catholic going to Christmas mass – before it was stopped altogether.

I left China at the age of four, which means I must have celebrated Spring Festival when I was very young. I have no memories of it, though. So when I came back to China in late 2007, I was excited to celebrate Spring Festival the right way – with family and explosions.

On the eve of the festival, my dad's side of the family gathered for a meal at my grandmother's house. Three of my uncles were there with their wives and my three cousins. We made dumplings for dinner, hiding a coin in one for good luck. I preemptively Googled instructions on how to perform the Heimlich maneuver.

After dinner, everyone shuffled toward the television to watch CCTV's four-hour snoozefest New Year's Gala. I had seen it a couple times growing up, on the Chinese channel that our antenna barely picked up. It was awful then and it was awful now, with its usual mishmash of patriotic medleys, crosstalk, comedian Zhao Benshan bumbling around, and the obligatory ethnic minority dance number.

One of my younger cousins had gone back to his room (his family lived across the hall), so I figured I'd go back to mine (I was living with my grandmother at the time) and wait for midnight,

when we would light the fireworks. When I got up to leave, my older cousin asked me where I was going.

When I told her, she said I should sit down and watch the show.

Why, I asked.

"Because you're in China," she said. "*Ruxiang suisu*."

If you've been in China a while, you've probably heard this phrase used to justify all kinds of crazy behavior. *Ruxiang suisu* is the Chinese equivalent of "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

Certainly when you go somewhere new you should respect the culture, learn the language, and try the food, but you've got to draw a line. I can't marry a coked-up hooker just because it's Vegas.

I told my cousin that "doing as the Chinese do" made no sense here because I wasn't getting any of the jokes and didn't know any of the songs. It was torture, watching the show.

"If you ever went to America," I said, "I wouldn't force you to watch the Super Bowl."

She responded with a sneer: "Who the hell would ever want to go to America?"

To be honest, I forget what happens here. My best guess is that I had some sort of Hulk-like transformation because the next thing I know, we're making ad hominem attacks.

"You Americans come to China and think you're better than everyone."

"That's right, I forgot. You know all about the world because your parents paid for you to go to college in Switzerland."

"And who are you?" she said. "You're just an English teacher. I bet you don't even make as much as me."

There are times when I wish life had a reset button – like the time I broke my glasses during a championship basketball game by catching a pass with my face or when I accidentally made fun of a kid with cancer. Calling your older cousin a "f**king bitch" in front of your relatives – and her parents – goes on that list.

It was one of those moments when all sound seems to fail. Even Zhao Benshan seemed to peer at me from the TV, like, *What the f**k did you say?* After an awkward silence, my grandmother defused the situation and my cousin went back to watching the New Year's Gala while I retreated to my room. To their credit, her parents didn't slap me. Nor did they tell my parents, who would have been furious.

My cousin and I haven't talked since then and we've been careful not to attend the same family functions. I ask about her every now and then, to make sure she's still alive. I found out later that she was a hardcore nationalist, but back then I thought she was still the older cousin who pushed me on my swing and walked me to preschool. Had I realized how much we'd both changed, I wouldn't have bothered to argue with her. I would have just smiled and nodded.

Whatever your plans for the holidays are, keep in mind: Spring Festival is a time for family and blowing shit up, but not blowing up at your family.

