Graveyard Picnics

PATRICK L. LEONG

The first time I remember a meal at the cemetery, I was in fifth grade, 1973. I attended Houston School in Visalia, California, whose fence shared borders with the north gate of the Visalia cemetery, where my Grandfather had been buried the previous year. During the burial, I remember seeing my friends playing “Russian Baseball,” baseball with a volleyball. It was two o’clock. Now, a year after his funeral, I found myself back at his grave, remembering, sharing a meal with him.

Dad began preparations for the trip by packing a picnic basket. He packed the same basket Mom used when she made lunches for me and my brother when we had swim meets. First, he packed eating utensils: chopsticks, forks, spoons, plates, and napkins. Other items he placed in the basket were incense, fake paper money the Chinese burn as offerings given to him by my Grandmother, fruit, a tablecloth, extra serving bowls, and matches: necessities for my Grandfather and his journey. After the basket was ready, he put it on top of the washer in the laundry room which was on the way out to the back door. Then, he washed out the ice chest in the backyard. He pretty much kept to himself as he worked, but I was curious. I wanted to know what he was doing and why. I wanted to know what I had to do.

I hopped on one of the bar stools at the breakfast bar that separated the family room and the kitchen as he started to prepare the food.

“What are you looking at?” he said with a smile. I laughed. It was like we were embarrassed, caught off guard.

“Just watching.”

“Oh,” he replied, concentrating on his cooking again.

PATRICK L. LEONG is a Chinese/Mexican-American who grew up and lives in Fresno, California and attends graduate school at Fresno State University.
“It’s been a year now since your Grandpa died so we’re going to visit him,” he said as if he thought I was looking for an explanation. I sat there ready to listen.

“This is his yearly meal I’m fixing. The only time he eats for strength. But, the food has strength only if a relative makes it.”

Since this was a yearly meal, Dad made it appetizing to replenish the strength Grandpa needed for another year of travelling. That was one reason he cooked the food the night before. Another reason was to save time the next morning.

“Just heat it up and load it in the ice chest, and we’re set to go.”

The eight-to-ten-course meal consisted of my Grandfather’s favorite foods as well as symbolic spiritual foods the Chinese offer the dead. The Chinese consider roast duck as a main meat dish, served at banquets, red egg and ginger parties, and ritual ceremonies. Dad bought four to five pre-cooked ducks in Chinatown when he went to San Francisco during the summer to visit my Grandmother. He cut and froze them to use them for special occasions, so when he needed one, he thawed it out and heated it in the oven. And, since he made a special trip to the city to restock his supplies, he also picked up bao, a Chinese biscuit used for duck sandwiches. My brothers loved the dish. I, on the other hand, didn’t like much of the authentic food.

Another dish he prepared was soy sauce chicken. I watched him cook this the night before. When it was done, he cut it and refrigerated it overnight. He served it cold.

“The ginger and soy sauce settle for better taste overnight,” he said.

He also steamed and fried shrimp and crab balls—a fish entrée. He shaped and served the seafood in a circular form because it is a sign of wholeness, good fortune, and fertility. Grandpa always liked fish with ginger and black beans. Since it took just a few minutes to cook the dish, he made this right before we left. He also made a speciality for my Grandfather: cow brains. They looked like shrivelled up balls and smelled rancid while he cooked them. The brown gravy-like juice that marinated the brains upset my stomach, but Dad said it was my Grandfather’s favorite, especially topped with tofu. I couldn’t stand the sight or smell of those things.

He boiled long, spaghetti-like noodles. We ate them because they represented longevity for both the living and the dead. We gave long life to my Grandfather, and he asked Buddha to grant us long human life, long like the noodles. A vegetable dish, sautéed mushrooms, won ton or shark’s fin soup, steamed rice, and sweet and sour pork completed the meal. Dad thought of his mixed children and his Chicana wife when he included the sweet and sour.

“This is for you,” he said while he labored, frying the baby pork ribs. He knew how much I disliked the food he cooked. He constantly teased and said, “You take after your mother’s side,” a Rome, in looks, personality, and psychology.

On the day of our trip, we set out at seven. Dad thought it was best to serve the meal in the crisp morning air, the time he thought Grandpa began his travels for the day. We entered the cemetery through the east gate. I saw my school to the right. Memories of the previous year crept back within recall.

My Grandfather’s tombstone sat on the corner of the first block after the entrance, black marble with streaks of white, his picture, and name, Chong Quock, dates of birth and death, July 6, 1869—October 12, 1972. I asked my Dad once why he had a different last name than we did. He answered, “Immigration.” I thought of Angel Island, the Chinese Exclusion Acts, the paper ghosts.

He parked the car on the wrong side of the curb and began to unload it. He grabbed the picnic basket from the car and placed it behind the tombstone.

“Jimmy, Patrick. Get the ice chest and bring it over here,” he ordered.

My brother jumped out of the car. I sat too lazy and tired to move.

“Help your brother,” Mom said.

We each grabbed a plastic handle and heaved the chest out of the trunk. Jimmy walked in front, and I followed to the tombstone. Meanwhile, Dad spread the white tablecloth in front of the grave, created a makeshift altar. My mother began to take out the plates and serving spoons. My youngest brother, Chris, just watched. He was only four years old, so there wasn’t much for him to do. Mom put him on a blanket in front of the tombstone. I guess he visited with Grandpa, stared at his grave while the rest of us prepared for the ritual.

Dad took a plate and opened the ice chest, putting a portion of each dish on the plate except the sweet and sour pork. Mom helped putting the steamed rice, soup, and fruit in separate bowls. Jimmy sat by Chris and played with him. I went to look at the other tombstones, read everyone’s name. I wondered if any of the other dead were relatives. I didn’t find anyone with my last name, but I did see one other tombstone with the same last name as my Grandfather. I thought we might be related, so I blessed the tombstone like I had seen the priest bless a casket when I served mass at a funeral.
"The Father, Son and Holy Spirit," I whispered as my mind made
a cross in mid-air.
I realized that Dad doesn’t worship like Mom’s Mexican
family. The Catholic tradition my mother and I had learned taught
us to pray for the dead, worship them at church perhaps through the
rosary. But the Chinese tradition my Dad had learned taught him to
worship his ancestors through these meals, keeping the spirit of the
dead alive among the living.
When I returned to Grandpa’s grave, Jimmy was putting chopsticks
across the food plate Dad had served for his father.
“Patrick, get the incense from the basket and stick it in the ground
by the tombstone,” Dad asked.
I ran to the basket and found the bright red package decorated
with serpents. There were about fifteen to twenty sticks.
“How many should I use.”
“All of them.”
I began placing the sticks around the grave as told. I thought of
making some design or something, but I didn’t want to take too long
setting up. I put seven in front, five in back and two on each side.
The rest were intermingled between the plates and bowls of food.
I saved one to place next to Chris. The smell of the burning incense
irritated me, and I thought I could irritate him too, but Mom saw me
put it next to his blanket.
“Take that away from him,” she scolded.
Next, Dad placed the fake paper money in a dish next to a tea
pot, no tea cups. He lit the incense, which called Grandpa back to us,
and stared at the grave. He began his dutiful service. My mother,
brothers, and I stood behind him as he bowed his head. I looked
around at the other Chinese graves, wondered if any were travelling
companions of my Grandfather. I wondered how many other eyes
watched or took part. I remembered the soot of my relatives echoing
against the laughter of my schoolmates the previous year. I didn’t
know what else to do, but stand there, so I said the Lord’s prayer and
drizzled into one of the many funeral masses I had served while I attended
Catholic school. ...In nomine del patris, filii, et spiritus sancti. ... Mom
prayed I assumed, made the sign of the cross.
After ten or fifteen minutes, Dad took the rest of the plates out of
the picnic basket and the food from the ice chest. We sat on the grass
in the odor of the incense, the dew wet against my pants. As we
began to eat, Dad lit the fake paper money. The ashes swirled through
the air. I wondered if he had given my Grandfather enough food and
money to last him the year. I realized that I was beginning to care for
my Grandfather’s afterlife too. I started to worry and wonder if he
was okay. I also wondered if he shared his wealth and food with
others, if he brought friends with him to his meal with us. I also
realized that someday I should hold these same type of ceremonies
for my father when he died. Would I, a Chinese/Mexican, be able to
continue this tradition, or would I worship him through the Catholic
faith? If I didn’t continue this type of service, would it come back to
haunt me, my dead elders punishing me for not keeping them alive?
As I looked around the cemetery, I began to lose my appetite. The
food didn’t taste as good as it would have if we ate it at home. I
guess the thought of eating among the dead somehow didn’t appeal
to me at the time. I felt lonely.
My Dad gave each of us something different to eat from my
Grandfather’s plate. This was another way of sharing a meal with
Grandpa. He gave us dishes according to what we each liked. I got
the mushrooms and vegetables. My older brother got the soy sauce
chicken; my younger brother the roast duck. Mom ate the seafood.
Dad the brains. Everyone received bao, rice, noodles, and tea. I sat
there, trying to stomach the food.
After we finished the meal, Dad put the supplies back into the
picnic basket, Mom helping. Jimmy and I grabbed the ice chest and
put it back in the trunk of the car. It was much lighter now. No
leftovers. Chris had gotten up and walked to the tombstone. He banged
on it with the Fisher Price plastic ball Mom had brought to keep him
occupied while we set up and ate. Maybe he was saying hello in his
own way, Grandpa’s spirit alive in his young grandson.
Dad didn’t speak much during the ritual. Usually, he spoke only
to give orders. I assumed his thoughts calmed him or it was part of
the service to remain silent. I wondered about his thoughts, though.
What had they said to each other? He used a napkin to wipe my
Grandfather’s picture on the tombstone. Then he walked around
the grave, collected the trash. The rest of us stood by the car, ready to
go. I yelled “Chong,” my Grandfather’s name, into Chris’ ear. He
laughed, tried to hit me for deafening his right ear.
We got into the car for the ride home. My stomach growled even
though I had just finished eating, but I felt good about myself. I still
wondered how my Grandfather survives for the year on the strength
of the magical food prepared by Dad. I also began to wonder if he
saw and followed me at anytime. Suddenly, Mom burped. Jimmy
and I laughed and looked at each other. Grandpa was thanking us
for his delicious meal.