

TAKING A GODSON

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One June Sunday evening, in 1995, I attended a ceremony at a restaurant in Tonnochy Road, Wanchai, at which a childless couple (the wife has a daughter by a previous marriage) adopted (*kai* 娶), Chinese style, a 28-year-old 'godson'. The first ceremony of this kind that I went to took place in a private home, when a girl of 19, for whom the foster mother had great affection, was adopted. Presents brought to the foster parent's house on that occasion, by her real parents in 1966, included a live chicken.

Among traditional Chinese it is important for a couple to have a son to offer sacrifices, to worship the departed and to carry on the family line. Without a son, one cannot die in peace. If you do not have one you can adopt one. Not infrequently, if two families want to strengthen the friendship existing between them, then one couple may *kai* an offspring from the other family. On such occasions, Chinese speak of *uen fan* (緣份), meaning 'predestined connections'.

Ancient custom had it that there was no distinction between an adopted and a natural son. An adopted boy could not be disinherited except for offences which would apply to a natural son. On the death of his foster parents an adopted son mourned as for the death of his natural parents, although J. Dyer Ball, in *Things Chinese* (1903), says the adopted son need only go into 'half mourning'. Ball also maintains that five per cent of Chinese families adopt children 70 per cent of whom are male. A large number of Hong Kong Chinese families adopt children today.

Although these adoptions are supposed to be permanent, come what may, I myself know of cases where relationships have been severed. For example, because of the alleged misconduct of the foster child.

But back to the case study in Wanchai. At that gathering in the restaurant there were four standard, Chinese, round tables, meaning that approximately 48 people, comprising relatives and friends, attended. A 'good day' had been chosen according to the Chinese almanac. The ceremony of 'adopting' commenced with a speech by godmother (*kai neung* 契娘)

The main ceremony consisted of the *kai ye* (契爺 godfather) and *kai neung* sitting below large Chinese characters, (meaning 'double happiness'), and a 3-inch diameter, draped red-paper 'streamer'. The 'son' then poured and 'offered up' cups of tea to his adopted parents and kowtowed. By accepting and drinking the tea this signified that the couple had taken the 28-year old man as their 'son'. He would, however, continue to live with his real parents. As with most Chinese ceremonies today, photographers were present to capture important moments on film.

The procedure of offering cups of tea was repeated by the new godson 'doing the honours' to the wife's eldest sister and her husband, as well as to another unmarried sister. At an adoption ceremony such as this, and on occasions like a parent's birthday and at Lunar New Year, such action displays filial piety. It is interesting that tea is always presented and drunk, not wine. Kowtowing is still sometimes performed in traditional Chinese families although it is not nearly so common in Hong Kong as it was, even 40 years ago.

In Chinese culture presents are commonly exchanged at this ceremony, of course they included the usual red 'lucky packets' containing money. The godparents also gave their godson a neatly packaged box holding two bowls and two spoons. These signified, 'May you never go hungry'. In China, which has been plagued by famine throughout history, such a wish was appropriate. After all, even as late as the early 1960s, 30 million (the exact figure is debatable) died after the crop failure during the 'Great Leap Forward'.

Several members of the two families involved in the Wanchai restaurant adoption ceremony are professional musicians. The godfather composes Chinese opera. On the evening in question his four *to tai* (徒弟 apprentices or pupils) also poured and offered up tea to their 'master'.

The last 'event' of the evening was the meal, which, of course, included roast suckling pig and shark's fin soup, washed down with brandy. As one would expect, as many of the guests worked in the entertainment business, karaoke accompanied the dinner. There was many a star performance.