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Sandor Lau: Secret Asian learns truth the hard way

By [Guest Columnists Guest](#), *This weekend's Going Bananas conference is sponsored by the New Zealand Herald*



My father has always been my hero, but it took me a while to figure it out. One of my jobs as a kid was to help Dad with firewood, which he insisted on stacking in a neat pile. You might forgive me if at the time I could not see the logic of neatly stacking wood, only to burn it. Dad insisted on doing everything the hard way.

He lost his temper only once. My brother and I were watching Saturday morning cartoons and there was a show with a buck-toothed, four-eyed Chinese guy who had us in stitches.

I could tell Dad was fuming when he walked in because he raised his voice. All he said was, "I'm a Chinese guy. And you're Chinese guys too."

I have always been a secret Asian man because I don't look Chinese. My great-grandparents on my mother's side had emigrated to the United States from Hungary, and my great-grandparents on my father's side had come to Hawaii from Guangdong.

But in Elizabeth, Colorado, population 1000, we were the only Chinese family and had to drive an hour to Denver to get dim sum.

My brother and I both came out looking pale with brown hair, and even our relatives in Hawaii mistook us for haoles (Caucasians). They were our closest connection to our Chinese roots, but not until we were teenagers could we understand their accents, which sound more like South Auckland than Charlie Chan.

Dr Sun Yat Sen was once asked what the most important effect of the Franco-Prussian war was, to which he responded, "It's too soon to tell."

In the 80s, it was too soon for me to tell that my buck teeth, four eyes, and straight-A report cards had anything to do with the Chinese guy in the cartoon. It was too soon to tell that many of my schoolmates found me just as hilarious as the Chinese guy in the cartoon, for many of the same reasons. Not that I noticed, as every waking hour but Saturday morning I was busy studying.

My ancestors had come such a long way so I could get an education, and I figured I had done my duty to them when I received a US Fulbright Scholarship to study film at the University of Auckland in 2000.

As my thesis at film school, I made a documentary, *Behaviours of the Backpacker*. In the film, I walked from Auckland to Cape Reinga, partly to figure out where I possibly come from in this world.

By now, lessons from the woodpile 20 years earlier were starting to sink in. I couldn't have known how many people would give me their stories and souls for the film, but I knew I would get something by walking that could not be had any other way.

I've just finished a new film, *Squeegee Bandit*. It's about a tough Maori guy from South Auckland who washes car windows for a living. It's about homelessness and the Treaty of Waitangi and finding God.

On the surface, it's about as far from my own experience as you can get. But I am convinced that autobiography is the only genre out there.

The most passionate reactions I get to those films are from people who see themselves in the characters and story.

I look at the films and ultimately see stories about a kid from Colorado who had to learn to do things the hard way, who had to come all the way to New Zealand to stack the firewood in a neat pile, who wanted to see something more than buck-toothed Chinese cartoon characters on TV.

** Sandor Lau is a Chinese/Hungarian-American documentary film-maker.*

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