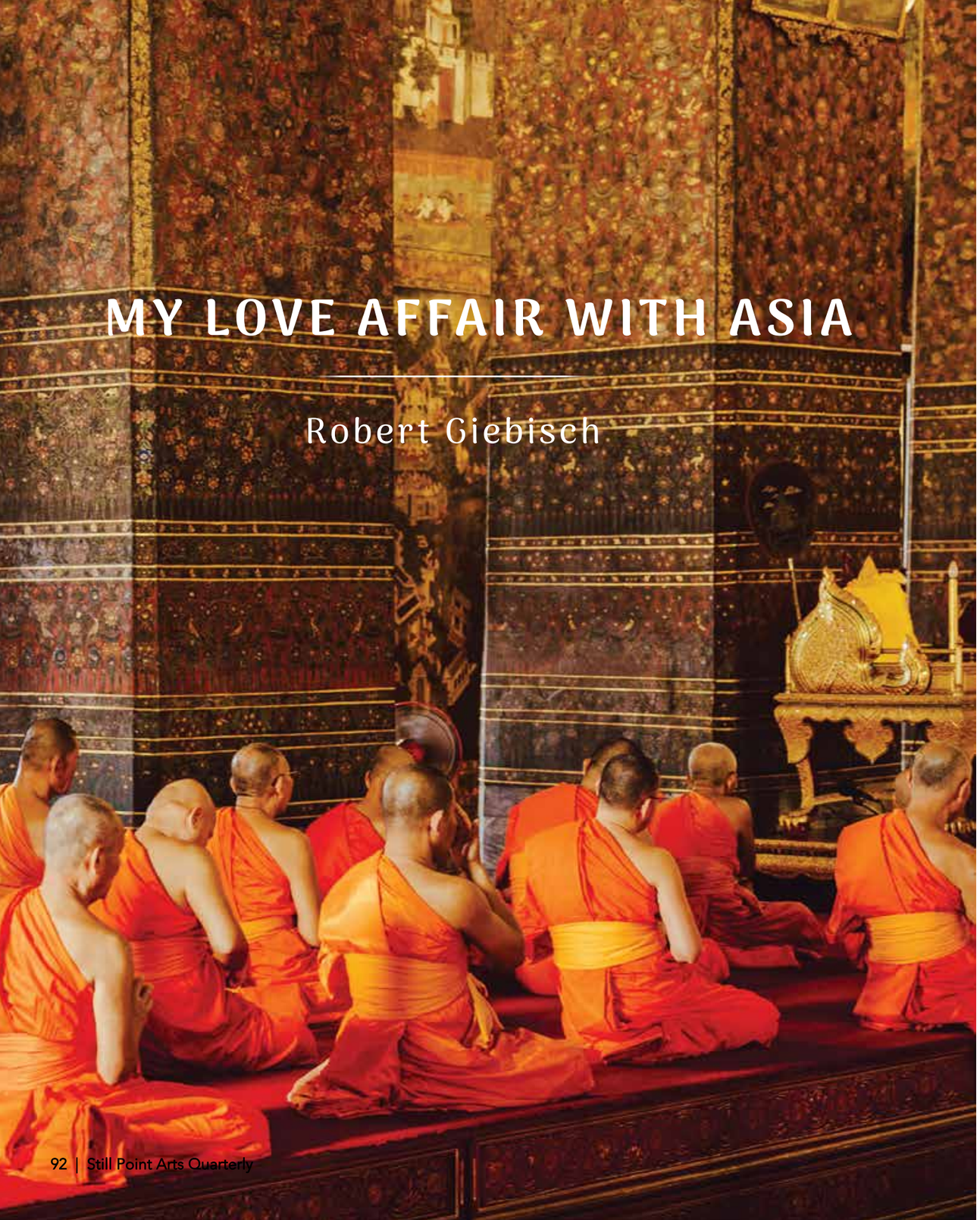

MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH ASIA

Robert Giebisch

image credits

As a child, I knew little about Asia. I had no Asian friends or acquaintances while growing up, and I can't recall my parents ever saying much about Asia. My world revolved around America and my European roots. I heard occasional references to "Red China" against the background of the Cold War hostility toward Communism, but I was too young to make sense of these random sound bites except to associate them with something sinister. Not an auspicious beginning for what would become a major relationship in my life!

By the time I reached elementary school, I had imbibed the usual stereotypes of Asians, or "Orientals" as they were then called. Asians were perceived as inscrutable and scheming, as in the character Oddjob played by Harold Sakata in the James Bond film *Goldfinger*. I briefly attended judo lessons in the midsixties that, along with Bruce Lee in the TV program *The Green Hornet*, reinforced a connection between martial arts and Asia.

My real interest in Asia started with my mother, a lapsed Catholic who practiced yoga in New York City in the early sixties and became a fan of Hermann Hesse who, besides being posthumously embraced by the American and European counterculture, had spent much of his life enamored with Indian mysticism and the figure of the Buddha. In 1911 Hesse journeyed to southeast Asia aboard a vessel passing through the Suez Canal and the Straits of Malacca. He eventually penned the novels *Siddhartha* and *Journey to the East*, both of which glorified Eastern religion. As a teenager I was influenced by his image of Asia as a spiritual paradise. His was a romantic notion of the East, which, in retrospect, I understand as the intellectual progeny of an earlier strand of European scholarship reaching back to the early nineteenth century when Germans undertook the first translations of Sanskrit, and philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer embraced Eastern mysticism as superior to that of the Western monotheisms. In a peculiar way, my Austrian roots with their German affinities had led me to an early awareness of Asia.

While in high school I discovered *The Three Pillars of Zen* by Phillip Kapleau sitting on my mother's book shelf, as well as one by D. T. Suzuki on Buddhism. At the time my mother studied tai chi, and the spines of other books on Eastern philosophy and Chinese medicine sat side by side with ones by Hermann Hesse and the Catholic monk Thomas Merton, who was also enamored with Buddhism and Taoism. This was the early 1970s, and in retrospect I realize that my mother was caught up in the first wave of America's fascination with and enthusiasm for Asian culture, especially Buddhism. I, too, fell under that influence. My mother pointed the way; I merely followed in her footsteps.

While in tenth grade I wrote a paper comparing American Transcendentalism with Japanese Zen Buddhism. This was when I first encountered the notion of transcendence—the shifting of one's consciousness from one's self toward something greater than one's ego. The Buddhist concept of "no-self" premiered in my life.

Eastern spirituality challenged the metaphysical existence of the individual, including the Judeo-Christian notion of the soul and later Enlightenment elaborations of individual freedom, happiness, and personality. My rebellious adolescent mind was attracted to this rejection of Western ideas.

While studying in Switzerland at the International School of Geneva during eleventh grade, Sydney Estrop, my English teacher from Singapore, inspired me to write an essay comparing Moses with Buddha. In my opinion, the Buddha pointed toward what seemed like a higher path. Drawing upon the archetypes of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, I leaped from West to East and back again.

My adolescent mind was brimming with abstract ideas. I sensed that Asia offered a radically different approach to some of the most fundamental questions of life. It wasn't until many years later, after I had married a Chinese woman, that I came to appreciate that these abstract ideas had real life consequences.

"I sensed that Asia offered a radically different approach to some of the most fundamental questions of life."

During my junior year at Harvard, I took a course on the history of Buddhism taught by Professor Masatoshi Nagatomi. This was my first systematic exposure to Buddhism and Asian history. Until then my knowledge had been haphazard and largely guided by whatever flavor of Eastern mysticism charmed me. Professor Nagatomi guided us through the Hinayana path from India to Sri Lanka to Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos; and the Mahayana thread from India to China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. For the first time, I appreciated that Buddhism was more than a spiritual plaything for disaffected Westerners. Real people in real places had been practicing it for centuries. Moreover, I began to realize that Asians weren't all generically similar. People from Korea, Thailand, Japan, and China were as radically varied as those from Spain, France, Germany, and Italy.

While taking Professor Nagatomi's course, I befriended an anthropology graduate student who was studying Thai Buddhism. The following summer I went to Germany to do research for my senior thesis, and somewhat on a lark, I decided to visit this graduate student in Chiangmai, Thailand. I bought a plane ticket to travel from Brussels to Bangkok, and before I knew it, I was on the other side of the world.

I still recall my descent over the rice paddies into Bangkok in August 1979. Landing in Thailand felt like touching down on a different planet. The smell of jasmine, the sight of Buddhist monks on the streets, the overnight train ride in a sleeper car to the hills of northern Thailand—it all felt so exotic. I visited hill tribes untouched by electricity and got my first glimpse of Buddhist monasteries. The tropical climate, the spicy food, the sense that America and Europe lay far away all exhilarated me. And this was long before Thailand had become a magnet for global tourism. Leaving Thailand that summer, I vowed I would return.

Sure enough, I returned three years later to study Buddhism. I had corresponded with the abbots of two forest monasteries—Wat Pah Nanachat in northeast Thailand and Wat Suan Mokkh in southern Thailand. I visited both and ended up staying at Wat Suan Mokkh for several weeks. This was my first exposure to what came to be known as mindfulness meditation. I slept alone in a hut in the jungle, ate one meal a day, and learned to follow my

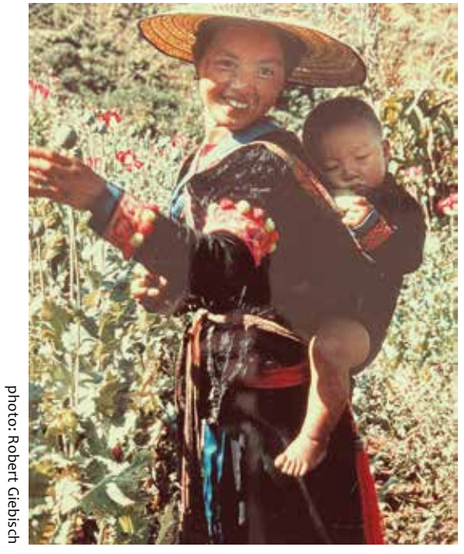

photo: Robert Giebisch

Harvesting Opium Poppies, Golden Triangle, Thailand, 1979

breath. It was an intense and humbling experience. And it changed the way I looked at myself and the world forever. To this day, when I meditate, I use the tools I learned at Wat Suan Mokkh.

In September 1982 I started medical school in San Francisco, ushering in what might be called the California stage of my relationship with Asia. The Bay Area's vibrant Asian population is one of the largest and most concentrated in the US, and while in San Francisco I attended Zen retreats at the Tassajara Mountain Center east of Big Sur and the Green Gulch Farm on Muir Beach in Marin County. I frequented the Zen Center in San Francisco and sampled 1980s Bay Area Tai Chi. Perhaps more significantly, I dated a medical school classmate, Myhanh, who had emigrated

photo: Robert Giebisch

Vaccination Clinic, Thailand, 1986

from Vietnam toward the end of US involvement in that part of the world.

Myhanh provided me with a taste of Vietnamese culture, in this case the high performing, upwardly mobile world of Asian professional immigrants. I broke up with Myhanh during the summer after my first year of medical school, but we remained good friends. Over the years, my wife Ninrong and I have vacationed with Myhanh and her husband, Dan. Dan and I even traveled together to Burma in 2006. Our shared sense of humor about our mixed families and a generally irreverent attitude toward life have contributed to the strength of our friendship.

During my senior year in medical school, I jumped at the opportunity to complete an extended rotation in tropical disease medicine in Chiang Mai, Thailand. This time I spent close to five months there during the winter and spring of 1986. I studied Thai and learned to read and write it a bit. I traveled across the remote, northeastern plateau of Isan toward Laos and down the Isthmus of Kra to the border with Malaysia. I made it to Ko Samui before an airport was built and the hotels and tourists arrived.

For many years I nurtured the fantasy of settling down in Thailand. I was attracted to the tropical lifestyle and its Buddhist ambience. Was I running away from the West, rejecting my father's European roots, hoping to escape the rat race of American capitalism? Yes, yes, and yes. In retrospect, I had fallen prey to Oriental Exoticism, a fantastical fascination with the Other. I imagined that residing in a beautiful country and embracing a foreign religion, in this case Buddhism, would bring me happiness.

Despite these Asian longings, in the years following my medical training in the Bay Area, I returned to the American east coast and plunged into my career as a psychiatrist. I relinquished my fantasy of moving to Asia and focused instead on establishing a life in America. As if to compensate for this geographical retreat, my spiritual life revolved around Buddhism, or what in retrospect I would come to call "Western neo-Buddhism."

What do I mean by this neologism? As the end of the millennium approached, a growing cohort of Baby Boomers who were highly educated and alienated from Western society embraced a unique mixture of all things Asian, ranging from Buddhism—especially its Tibetan and Zen variants—Taoism, mindfulness meditation, yoga, and tai chi, often remade into a progressive lifestyle consistent with self-actualization, mental health, and a generally green value system.

Spiritual systems such as Buddhism seemed to offer the best of both worlds. One needn't submit to the irrational faith of believing in God, and one could pursue enlightenment without abandoning the scientific world view with which we had all grown up. Books were even written about *The Tao of Physics* (Fritjof Capra, 1975). Also, the Western monotheisms such as Christianity seemed so lame and spent, associated as they were with colonialism and the West's cultural hubris.

Only there was one problem: Had we Westerners, with our enthusiasm for meditation, stripped Buddhism of its ethical dimensions? From my days at the forest monastery in Thailand, I had appreciated that the purpose of meditation was not relaxation, peace, or happiness, although these pleasant feelings and assumed health benefits might be accidental side effects. Rather, the purpose of meditation remained an ethical one—to live selflessly and compassionately in harmony with other sentient beings. By following one's breath and releasing one's self, one grew more compassionate and generous. Had the Western embrace of all things Asian betrayed its telltale individuality by stripping Buddhism of its moral foundation? I tended to sweep these doubts aside. Yet over the years as I got married and returned to visit Asia, these doubts grew stronger and eventually made me realize that my initial embrace of Buddhism was probably a bit naive.

Meanwhile, in the early to mid-1990s, while completing my psychiatric training at the New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, I continued my love affair with Asia. I joined the Asia Society on Park Avenue and read books on Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. I learned about Taoism through Lao-Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*. I discovered a book by Takeo Doi, a Japanese psychiatrist, entitled *The Anatomy of Dependence*, in which he elaborated a uniquely Japanese theory of *amae* or emotional dependence. I sensed that Western psychiatry, the field I was about to enter, was culture-bound with its emphasis on therapy and individual self-exploration. Meanwhile, I continued to participate in weekend Zen retreats in Manhattan, sitting and walking, in search of that ever elusive peace of mind.

photo: Robert Giebisch

The Orange Ball Drops into the Sea, Ko Samui, Thailand

Then one sunny summer day in August 1993 my world was turned upside down, and my relationship with Asia changed forever. I laid eyes on Ninrong at a falafel stand on the corner of York Avenue and East 69th Street, and I fell head over heels in first-sight, Shakespearean love. By May the following year we were wed, and on September 8, 1994, on my thirty-seventh birthday, our daughter Allison was born.

A PhD student at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Institute and a graduate of Peking Union Medical College (the most selective in China), Ninrong was a strong willed, independent woman who had immigrated to the US on a student visa to pursue a doctorate in neuroscience. By a lucky twist of fate, "Papa Bush" had granted her and her Chinese classmates green cards in the wake of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Aside from her physical beauty and strength (she ran the New York City Marathon within a few months of my meeting her), Ninrong possessed an intellect and, as I was to learn later, a heart greater than mine. She had read Tolstoy, enjoyed listening to Tchaikovsky, knew *La Bohème*, and had survived and thrived in the real world. The daughter of a high-ranking People's Liberation Army air force officer who had fallen from grace after Lin Biao's ill-fated flight to the Soviet Union, Ninrong had grown up in a re-education camp in a school with a dirt floor, immigrated to the US with forty dollars in her pocket, and eventually became a successful, board-certified American physician. I had met my match and was about to begin the journey of a lifetime with a real Asian woman.

In the years that followed, I became absorbed in starting a private practice, raising two children, and supporting Ninrong as she completed her medical training in pathology at Yale. Her mother came to live with us and help raise our kids, but she soon became depressed and returned to China; the social isolation of the American suburbs in Connecticut proved too much for her. We hired live-in Chinese nannies, and I was soon surrounded by the sound of the Chinese language all day long. I ate Chinese food, tried to speak and write Chinese as Allison attended Chinese school on the weekends, and befriended several other mixed couples through our children.

During these years I continued to buy and read books about Buddhism and Chinese history, but I was mostly caught up in the hustle and bustle of work and family life. I reflected little on Asian culture and made no attempt to connect my spiritual interest in Buddhism with my new identity as the parent of two mixed children. In fact, before Allison and Danny started elementary school, they seemed blithely unaware that they were of half-Chinese and half-Austrian descent. I lived my life and had little time or inclination for reflection.

In retrospect, I realize now that Ninrong and I were living on the cutting edge of a demographic trend. Mixed marriages, still relatively novel, would, by the turn of the millennium, become commonplace. I wonder now if our mixed family may have been an expression of a more general millennial optimism about globalization and the permeability of national boundaries. China was "opening up," Westerners were embracing Asian culture—or at least their notion of it!—and I, perhaps somewhat naively, envisioned a future where East and West might converge in a great singularity.

It was around this time that I also started to read Thomas Merton, an author to whom my mother had introduced me years earlier. Accidentally electrocuted in a hotel bathroom in Bangkok in 1968, Merton was a Columbia graduate who had converted to Catholicism as an adult and became a Trappist monk. He wrote several books about Buddhism, Taoism, and the overlap between Christian and Buddhist mysticism. Before his untimely death at the age of fifty-three, he journeyed to Thailand, India, and Sri Lanka, met with the Dali Lama, and developed a deep fascination with and respect for Eastern mysticism. His *Asian Journals* intrigued me. Here was a thoughtful and sensitive man who grappled with the nature of enlightenment and salvation. In Thomas Merton, I found a kindred soul, someone who teetered on the edge between East and West. He seemed to suggest that one could meditate and pray, work on releasing one's attachments while cultivating a loving relationship with a personal God, and embrace a spiritual path in which dharma and loving kindness might coexist with grace and forgiveness. In other words, I needn't relinquish my European roots to embrace my new Asian ones.

"In Thomas Merton, I found a kindred soul, someone who teetered on the edge between East and West."

Meanwhile, reality intruded upon these more idealistic notions. In 2004 my wife, our two children, and I made our first trip to mainland China to visit Ninrong's family. China was in the midst of its epic boom. Skyscrapers and cranes dotted the landscape. Old towns and cities were being razed to the ground and replaced with seas of concrete and steel. I had never witnessed firsthand such rapid development and was instantly disabused of whatever peaceful and harmonious stereotypes I might have held of Asian spirituality. Here were greed, ambition, and materialism on full display.

Ninrong's family embodied the successful, rising Chinese middle class. Her

和平

PEACE AND HARMONY

mother had survived the Cultural Revolution to see her three children— two in China, one in America—thrive. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Middle Kingdom had been denied its rightful place in the sun as Europe and America—the barbarians—had humiliated China. Now the tables would be turned. Indeed, I sensed a rising pride as the Chinese people threw off the yoke of poverty and literally took to the skies as tourists to fly to Yunnan, Cambodia, Singapore, and New York City. Moreover, although McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Pizza Hut had debuted in China, it seemed to me as if China was not so much westernizing as modernizing. They were booming in their own Chinese way.

During this trip in 2004, we flew from Shanghai to the edge of the Tibetan plateau, traveling to Shangri-La City in the foothills of the Himalayas. Originally called Gyalthang ("royal plains" in Tibetan), on December 17, 2001 the Chinese government, in an effort to promote tourism, renamed it Shangri-La, after the fictional land of Shangri-La from the 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* by James Hilton. I had read this novel as a teenager and been captivated by it. In the story, a plane crashes in Tibet in a magical world where no one ages. Here I returned as an adult and found myself wandering about its streets as a tourist.

Shangri-La hovered on the cusp between past and future. In the morning one might drive over rocky roads to visit Tibetan villages subsisting without electricity. That evening, you might eat spaghetti Bolognese in an Italian restaurant. Roads were being paved everywhere, and airports and hotels were rising up. One could almost feel the velocity of money coursing its way through the valleys of Yunnan. This was not the China of the *Tao Te Ching* or Mao's Cultural Revolution. No, this was a nascent superpower on the verge of remaking the world in its image.

Following our trip to China in 2004, I resumed my life in America, earning a living as a doctor and raising two children. In an ironic role reversal, I soon morphed into a Tiger Dad, the male version of the Asian Tiger Mom who pushes her children to earn straight A's, master classical music, and get into Ivy League colleges. Ninrong assumed the gentler, more permissive—and presumably Western—role. So much for stereotypes! And with both of our children studying cello at the Juilliard Pre-College Program, I soon came to realize, in a further East-West twist, that a new generation of Asian artists had come to dominate the world of Western classical music performance. It seemed as if Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart were now more popular in Asia than in Europe. Everything seemed to be turned upside down.

For me, perhaps the greatest teacher of Asian, or at least Chinese culture, turned out to be my family. An incorrigible intellectual, I loved to discuss politics, philosophy, and history, and tended to question most things, ranging from the meaning of life to the best place to travel. I preferred either / or answers and searched for singular truths. For Ninrong, multiple truths might happily co-exist. There needn't be just one way of looking at something or somebody. Sunny days could be enjoyable but so could cloudy ones. Democratic America and authoritarian China might each have their merits. It could be nice to visit Europe or South America, but it could also be fine to just stay home. I preferred precision. She gravitated toward ambiguity. At first this aggravated me. I eventually came to appreciate the quiet wisdom of her indecision. Her approach took detours and traced circles, avoiding head-on collisions and bouncing off my perspective in an elegantly tangential style.

Another difference that dawned on me the longer I lived with Ninrong was the centrality of connections to her life. Ever since I was a child, I had always understood my life as one great adventure in which I played the starring role. I was the master of my fate. Ninrong experienced her mission as ensuring the happiness of her mother, children, friends, and colleagues. Her goal was to keep everybody and everything in harmony.

For me, life was linear, with a list of goals and accomplishments. For her, life was circular, always about how to maintain the happiness and harmony of everyone. Her modesty, versus my self-promotion, flowed naturally from this privileging of group over individual. She minimized her or her children's accomplishments, while always highlighting those of her friends or acquaintances. To brag was the height of bad manners.

When we hosted parties at our house or visited Asian or other mixed families, I noticed that people tended to form circles (literally) rather than break off into duos or trios. Munching nuts and sipping tea, gossiping and telling jokes took place within these circles. People took turns, laughed, listened. Conversations flowed in tandem. One-on-one conversations were the exception rather than the norm.

With the advent of the internet, social media, and smartphones, I noticed another cultural difference. If one didn't take a picture and share it with someone,

it didn't happen! We might take a safari in Zimbabwe, walk through a side street in Florence, or admire a glacier in Iceland, but if one didn't take a picture of it, well, it was as good as if one hadn't traveled there. And the same applied to food. Whether at home or at a restaurant, I found us forever taking aerial shots of our meals, hovering over our dishes before they were destroyed and ingested. While I was content to pass through life with my own two eyes (and mouth!), Ninrong felt compelled to document and share her experiences with others. Yes, the Asian group versus the Western individual.

A further difference emerged. When confronted with a problem, my reflex was to confront it head on. The roof leaked, a bill hadn't been paid, an appointment must be scheduled, a trip planned—I marched right into these tasks and tried to conquer them. I dissected problems, debated pros and cons, tried to cut to the chase. Angular, acute, incisive. In contrast, Ninrong walked around problems, lived and toyed with them, and accepted them as companions in life. If all problems were solved, she felt uneasy. Life wasn't meant to be perfect. Perfection invited disaster. It violated nature's preference for disorder. Better to live in harmony with nature than in opposition to it.

Much to my delight, I stumbled upon an academic discourse confirming these experiences. François Jullien, a French sinologist at Paris Diderot University (Paris VII), authored a treatise entitled *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece* (2000). Jullien traced durable differences that distinguished Chinese from Greek philosophy, military strategy, and diplomacy. Whereas the East tended to deflect, parry, and accommodate, the West confronted, dissected, and conquered. The West met challenges at acute angles, the East tangentially. Jullien even claimed to observe these differences in the realm of military strategy and diplomacy. Think Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. Perhaps even tai chi.

And yet as soon as I discerned these differences, the world changed so quickly that these contrasts seemed to dissolve and dissipate into thin air. Inveterate traveler that I was, I insisted on schlepping my kids to the Asia of my youth. In 2009, Ninrong and I brought our son Danny to Cambodia and Thailand. We landed in Phnom Penh just as Cambodia was emerging from the shadow of the Khmer Rouge and before the hordes of tourists descended upon Angkor Wat. We strolled along the banks of the Mekong, gazed in amazement at the temples of the twelfth-century Buddhist king Jayavarman VII, flew to Chiang Mai, and hopped down to the shores of Ko Samui. I tasted Southeast Asia once again, marveled at the bougainvillea, admired the yellow-robed monks, smelled the fish sauce, the cilantro, the curry.

And yet everything had changed. The hectic aughts had overtaken the languid eighties. Exhaust fumes, blacktop pavement, blond-dyed hair, and cell phones were ubiquitous. Southeast Asia was on the move. A whiff of guilty loss engulfed me. Guilty, yes, for wasn't it more than a tad silly and selfish to bemoan the loss of poverty and tradition? Didn't everyone have the right to air conditioning, hot running water, refrigerated food, and access to cars and airplanes? People were not meant to inhabit museums. The colonial days were long gone. Asia was casting off the inhibiting cloak of Western stereotypes. Shopping malls, fast food, and the internet had arrived. There was no turning back.

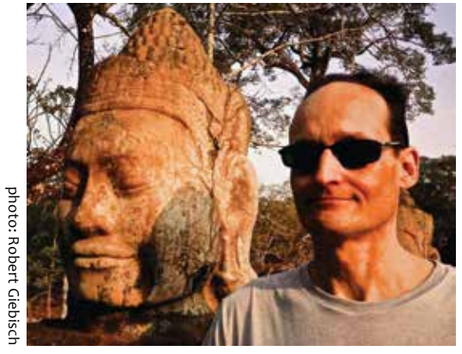

photo: Robert Giebisch

Western Man Tries to Become Enlightened

And yet I clung to my fantasies. Might I still not catch a whiff of the Asia I had once known? And so it was, during the summer of 2012, that Ninrong and I brought our two children on a trip to Bali. I had first heard about Bali from backpackers in Thailand in 1979. I had always imagined Bali as the pristine, exotic paradise of which these young hippies had raved. The fact that it was a Hindu island in a largely Muslim archipelago only further added to its allure.

Sure enough, once we arrived in Bali, I was confronted by congested streets, tee-shirt shops, and hordes of visitors. Yet, as soon as we left the towns on the coast and hiked up into the hills, I sensed something mystical. I discovered locals worshiping at Hindu shrines and partaking in elaborate offerings to their gods. Incense rose into the tropical air. A humble wisdom seemed to persist in these quiet people. Time moved slowly.

One night while in Bali, my son, Danny, and I rose around 1:00 a.m. and hiked up Mount Agung (3,014 meters or 9,888 feet), the tallest volcano on the island. Following a local guide, we started off in lush, tropical forests, crossed the tree line, and ascended steep fields of scree. We summited just as the sun rose over a carpet of clouds, the volcano casting its triangular shadow behind our backs. As we stood atop Agung, I felt an epiphany, a sense that this was a special moment that might arrive only once in this lifetime.

Fresh off that trip to Bali, I continued to believe that if I searched long and hard enough, I might yet savor the original Asia, the one uncontaminated by the West. Hence three trips to Burma (Myanmar) in 2006, 2014, and 2015. Making it past immigration in Yangon, I circumambulated the

photo: Robert Giebisch

Cambodian Monks in Phnom Penh

golden-domed Shwedagon Pagoda and trekked with my daughter, Allison, among the Shan hill tribes by Inle Lake. Here, behind the borders of a military dictatorship, traditional Asia persisted in a freeze frame.

And yet what I found in Burma wasn't all pretty. People lived in fear of the proverbial knock on the door. People spoke in hushed tones about politics. Young troops in jeeps, well armed with automatic weapons,

photo: Robert Giebisch

Danny Atop Mount Agung on Bali, 2012

dropped by homes for mandatory "donations." Buddhist monks agitated for the liquidation of the Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State. At the edges of this Buddhist paradise lurked the stench of ethnic cleansing.

I probed further into the history of Buddhism as a living religion. Buddhist soldier monks. Buddhist violence. Japanese Buddhist monks who had equated death in battle with *satori* (enlightenment) in World War II. Emptiness, non-self in the service of killing and war. Might Western neo-Buddhism be a Western projection, an expression of spiritual exoticism, an oversimplification at best, a delusion at worst? A fantasy of a pacifistic, gentle religion stripped of its violent dimensions? How far I had traveled from the romantic fantasies of Hermann Hesse, those days in the isolated forest monasteries of Thailand, and the spiritual sightseeing of Bay Area Zen! Stereotypes and projections had been easier to deal with than complexity and ambiguity.

And then, while on a solo trip to Cambodia in the winter of 2013, I experienced an epiphany. After traveling to the border between Cambodia and Thailand to experience the spectacular Khmer temple of Preah Vihear, I returned to Phnom Penh and strolled along the banks of the Mekong River one night. The sun set in a glorious blue-pink haze. Off in the distance the Muslim call to prayer

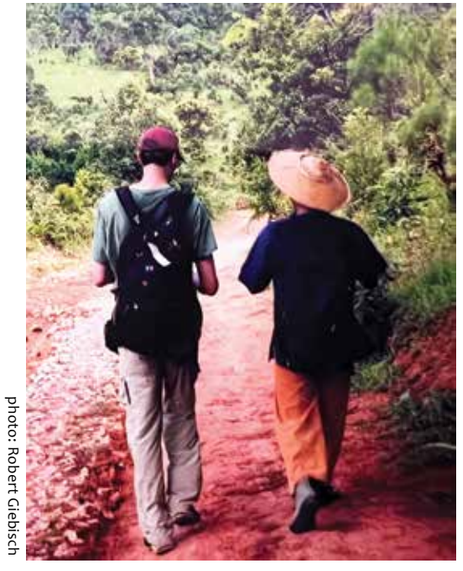

photo: Robert Giebisch

Hiking in the Burmese Hills, 2014

moaned. I realized that I was very, very far from home. I felt a spiritual undercurrent, call it God, if you will, tugging at my soul. I found myself praying to this God, whom I believed might hear me. The emptiness for which I had searched for so many years had led me back to the God of my childhood. I had come full circle.

Since that fateful moment in Phnom Penh, I have felt myself gradually turn westward. I have come to appreciate my European roots, even while celebrating my new Asian ones. I have made frequent trips to Europe, read the Western cannon, and embraced classical music and art with renewed enthusiasm.

As I've gazed West, I've realized that its monotheisms, like the traditions of the East, are all too human. Religious wars, bigotry, and intolerance tarnish their history as well and cast a shadow over the spiritual truths they champion. I reside on the fault lines between East and West, following the Tao, listening to the Buddha, and praying for God's grace. The promise of the great singularity still beacons. Might I follow in Thomas Merton's footsteps?

Meanwhile, Asia has modernized in its unique way, my children have grown up in an increasingly mixed world, and our family has developed its own blend of East and West. Tai chi, yoga, Buddhism, Taoism, and mindfulness meditation have all been mainstreamed into Western culture.

I take my shoes off when I enter our home. My wife and I watch Verdi and Puccini operas at the Met in New York City. My children relish Chinese dumplings. My son is married to a young woman whose parents attended the same university that my wife did in China. And my daughter has married a man whose parents hail from China with Portuguese ancestors in his family tree courtesy of Macau.

I feel more Western than ever but appreciate Asia more than at any moment in my life. I study tai chi weekly and attend Mass on Sundays. My love affair with Asia is alive and well. The only difference is that I have come to know and accept who I am.