

My Life as Isaac

by Charlette Hwang

In Things Fall Apart, Okonkwo chokes Isaac by the neck after finding out that Isaac was talking to the Christians. Isaac leaves the family and renounces the Ibo culture to study Christianity. This tumultuous father-son relationship reminds me of my relationship with my father.

My father is a traditional man. He is the *jangnam*, the head male of the family bloodline. The *jangnam* is the leader of the family. He organizes and leads the numerous *jaesa*, rituals to commemorate the family's ancestors. My father inherited mostly everything from his father, including the family-owned land and, with it, the burdens and the duties of being the *jangnam*. To this day, I don't know how he feels about these obligations but he fit into the role quite well. He never failed to provide for the family even when his job was too taxing for him. He was meticulous in organizing the *jaesas*; we didn't miss a single *jaesa* for more than ten years.

There were about four to five *jaesas* each year and each required a lot of work. My mother and my grandmother would make an enormous amount of food to fill the big table that was used for the ritual. I would sit at the couch with my father while this happened because men weren't supposed to concern themselves with such trivial matters. One by one, my relatives would start coming in, the men to the couch and the women to the kitchen. When the food was ready, it was all put on to the big table which was placed at the end of the living room. A *byeongpung*, a temporary wall with traditional paintings, would go behind the table. In the lower left corner of the big table was a smaller table. This was my table. Being my father's son, I was also the *jangnam*. The land would one day come to me along with all the responsibilities it entails. As such, even at a young age, I had a role in the *jaesa*. My duty was to pour out the *soju* for each family member to present to the ancestors. I would be ever so careful so that the cup was filled to the brim but not overflowing. With each cup I poured, I was fulfilling my duties as the *jangnam*. As the ritual ended, everyone would praise me for my great work and my father would smile. Then all the men would gather around the big table while the women and children ate at the smaller table. I was the only child invited to the big table. I was proud to be able to sit with the men. I was proud to be the *jangnam*. Until we moved to New York.

I still wonder if my father regrets his decision to move us to New York. It was in many ways the crack that became the chasm that stands between us today. His intentions were simple: move to New York so that the kids could learn English. With this new competitive edge, I would be well-equipped to become the *jangnam* he wanted me to be. Unfortunately for him, English wasn't the only thing I learned in New York. New York taught me of freedom, of diversity, of equality. Like with the Christian's slow establishment in Umuofia, doubt about the culture I had been born in, the culture that I upheld so proudly, slowly set in. On top of all this, I was starting to question the *nam*, or male in Korean, in *jangnam* itself; I realized that I wanted to be a woman. How could I continue to perform the *jaesa* knowing how sexist it was? Why did I have to bear the burden of leading the family? Why did I have to listen to everything my father said? Why did I have to be a *nam*, or worse, the *jangnam*?

I brought these doubts and questions about our culture to my father. I now realize how disruptive these questions were to my father. To question why was the same as questioning why my father had

spent most of his life living up to his title as the *jangnam*. It was a challenge to his authority as the provider and leader of the family. He screamed at me and things fell apart.

I sit here today as a transwoman, having renounced my title as *jangnam*. This denial has little meaning to my father; he expects that I will one day come to my senses and live up to my birthright. While he doesn't know that I'm a transwoman, it's as if he knew that he would one day have to fight my innate femininity when he named me "Chul Soon". "Soon" was the *dollimja*, a suffix my generation had to use. He disliked the feminine nature of the suffix "Soon" so he chose the prefix "Chul" or steel in Korean. He hoped that the masculinity of "Chul" would counteract the femininity of "Soon."

I wonder if such a thing is ever possible. Could Okonkwo have convinced Isaac in some way to be more masculine? Was there anything he could say or do that could have reversed Christianity's effect on Isaac? On the other side, would there have been anything Isaac could have said to have Okonkwo accept him for who he is? If Isaac had been more methodical in approaching Okonkwo with the ideals of Christianity, would Okonkwo have listened?

I wonder if Isaac could have ever forgiven Okonkwo for the years of abuse and violence. I wonder if Okonkwo could have ever accepted Isaac back into the family. Could they have ever gone back to the way things were? If they couldn't, where was the point of no return? When Isaac abandoned his family? When Okonkwo choked Isaac? When the Christians came? When Okonkwo beat Isaac for not being masculine?

I wonder. Could things have not fallen apart?