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A trip down ancestral lane

By MARK GRAHAM



Lesley Delapaz (fourth left) and family members at her grandfather's ancestral village in Kaiping. The trip gave her a new perspective on her family tree. (PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY)

It was an emotional moment when Lesley Delapaz and her mother stepped off the bus in a small village in South China's Guangdong province, meeting distant relatives for the first time.

Delapaz's grandfather Luis Lee (Li Yitang) emigrated from Kaiping to the Dominican Republic early in the last century, where he met and married her grandmother. Li, who died in the mid-1990s, rarely talked about his past, and it was a subject Delapaz did not pursue when growing up.

But a posting to Beijing piqued her interest. While in China, she thought to herself: Why not try and find out more about the culture and background of her grandfather, perhaps even arranging to meet people in the small village where he grew up?

Enter Lie Huihan with his My China Roots investigative team. With help from records offices and local officials, Lie managed to find the precise Guangdong community where her grandfather came from and make arrangements for a meeting between Delapaz, her mother and the villagers.

"The villagers were very welcoming although we did get a lot more curious stares than in Beijing," Delapaz says. "They were very curious to know if we had information on other relatives of my grandfather's generation who emigrated."

She was surprised they managed to track down their relatives, she says, who are descendants of her grandfather's uncles. The group she met included siblings and their children, as well as an older grandcousin who had memories of Delapaz's grandfather.

"I was surprised to find much that reminded me of the Dominican Republic — the architecture, style and colors, combined with the humidity.

"It helped to make sense of my grandfather's lack of interest in emigrating to the United States where my mother and other relatives lived." Her mother had moved to the US in 1976 and she was born three years later.

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The experience gave Delapaz a new perspective on her family tree.

She adds: "There was a sense of closure with regards to my grandfather's background and his mysterious origin story. It was great to find out about the migratory wave to the Dominican Republic from China and to put his life in historical perspective. Even though I will never have details from him, I feel he is much more fleshed out to me."

Delapaz says she learned valuable lessons from the trip, including a better understanding of how being a bi-racial child affected her mother, who confessed how other Chinese in the Dominican Republic shunned her family because her father married a local.

"I do not feel any more Chinese than before. Culturally I am very much Dominican and American, but I do feel of China as a homebase now, a place to return to and visit with relatives even though their culture and ways are not my own," Delapaz concludes.



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