

Valdosta Scene Magazine

One family's traditions become a South Georgia tradition
while keeping a nation's customs alive

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— **Serena Huang faced a dilemma.**

A Taiwanese native, she loved her adopted home of the United States. She loved it so much that she and her husband, Wilson Huang, a fellow native of Taiwan, decided to stay in America, to live and work here, to raise a family in the United States. This was the crux of Serena Huang's dilemma.

Her children, daughter Joanna and son Jon-Jon, were growing up as Americans, which made Serena proud, but she was also proud of her Taiwanese roots, history and traditions. She worried her children would grow up without connections to their genealogical ancestry or culture. By living in America, she believed her children would have no memories of the world that had shaped the childhoods of both Serena and Wilson. Serena Huang set out on a course that would bring her children closer to the family's native land. Yet, her course would also deepen the understanding of Taiwan and Asia for thousands of South Georgia children and adults. It would keep ancient Taiwanese traditions alive in a distant land while Taiwan has moved away from its cultural past to embrace Western culture.

Now, with her brainchild festival of the Asian Cultural Experience becoming Azalea International Folk Fair, Serena Huang's answer to her dilemma brings the whole world to South Georgia while introducing South Georgia to the world.

Before developing a festival that embraces the world, there was the story of two young people who discovered each other while seeking an education thousands of miles from home. After three years of law-enforcement service in his native Taiwan, Wilson Huang traveled to the United States to study criminal justice. He had seen Hollywood movies and American television and was fascinated with the United States. He believed it would be fascinating to study in the U.S. Plus, an American education, Huang explains, would increase his employment and promotion possibilities upon return to Taiwan. Returning home to live and work in Taiwan was the original plan nearly three decades ago when Wilson arrived in the U.S. and enrolled at Arizona State University.

Meanwhile, in 1984, Serena also enrolled at Arizona University. Her arrival on campus was a dream comes true. "In Taiwan, I had always dreamed of America," she says. "It is such a beautiful country, a paradise!!" She came to America to study English. Her original plans, following her studies, were a return to Taiwan to teach English as a second language.

Their plans of returning to their native land changed in 1984 when Wilson met Serena. Serena had also come to America for another reason. As a child, she had been told she would meet her husband in America. "I had been told my husband would be waiting for me in America," Serena says. "I saw Wilson and knew that was it." While Serena was starting her studies at Arizona State University, Wilson was completing his. But as Serena knew he was the one upon meeting him, Wilson had similar feelings for her. "The moment we met I knew I would have to make a decision," Wilson says. "Serena was so charming and beautiful. I knew I cannot let this opportunity slip away." Three months after meeting, Wilson and Serena married.

This is how the Huang's lives together in America started. Wilson's studies continued in University of Maryland and in Georgia, where he also worked at Georgia State University. He and Serena started a family, first with daughter Joanna then son Jon-Jon. In 1998, Wilson accepted an associate professor position with Valdosta State University's master's degree program in criminal justice. The Huangs moved to Valdosta.

Serena had always been enamored with America even before arriving here. Wilson had been fascinated with the U.S., while the longer he lived here, the more he came to share Serena's dream of America. They were proud to see their children growing up in America with American friends and growing up with American ways, but they wanted their children to know something of Taiwan's culture. How would she share her Taiwanese heritage with her Americanized children? As a child, Serena had learned traditional Taiwan dances. She wanted to teach these dances to Joanne as Wilson was planning to teach martial arts to Jon-Jon, but how to get their children interested without the youngsters rebelling against the notion? Serena struck upon an idea that became the kernel of what thousands of people will participate in this month. She would include her children's friends. If their friends were interested then the Huang children would be interested. So, with permission from her children's schools, which were then Hahira Middle and Dewar Elementary, Serena began teaching Taiwanese dance to Joanna and Jon-Jon as well as their classmates. Wilson also got Jon-Jon's attention for martial arts through his young friends.

"At first, I thought it was embarrassing," says Joanna of her mother sharing a short program and Asian food with young classmates in the school library. To Joanna's surprise, her friends loved it and wanted to learn the dances. With her friends' acceptance, Joanna wanted to learn the dances, too. Serena's idea was paying off. From small recitals in her children's schools, the dance lessons grew to include other schools. The recitals became

performances at Mathis City Auditorium, which grew into a two-day event which also featured games, food, information and more on Taiwan then Asia then the East.

The festival became a multiple-day event called Asian Cultural Experience which moved to the James H. Rainwater Conference Center. An international dance competition was added. This year, a Power Tech feature has been added as well as making the festival inclusive of cultures from around the world.

As the event has grown, it has become a major part of the Huang's family life. They have spent thousands of dollars and countless hours making the festival a success.

Joanna is now a Lowndes High School senior. Jon-Jon is a Lowndes High sophomore. Asked about the festival, they tell stories of completing tedious tasks such as making posters and folding letters and seeing it grow through the years. "I really thought it would simmer out over time," Joanna says of the festival, noting that she will be leaving for college come fall but has already planned to return for the Azalea International Folk Fair in March 2008.

"It can be stressful," Jon-Jon says, adding that it has also been beneficial in that it has increased their communication skills with a wide variety of people and organization skills for a multitude of projects. Most summers, the Huangs return to Taiwan, where news of the Valdosta event has gained attention. It has been featured in numerous newspapers and in Asian media. The inclusion of a Power Tech program in this year's Azalea International has received Taiwanese sanctioning.

Yet, irony is at play here.

The festival's origins were a reflection of Wilson and Serena's desire for their children to better understand the world they had left behind. Wilson and Serena wanted their children to learn the things which they had learned as children in Taiwan. Since they've been gone, though, Taiwan has changed. The ancient dances have been replaced by Western forms such as jazz, ballet and tap. Taiwan culture has rejected many of the customs of its past to welcome new ideas and styles. Serena Huang started her festival as a way to keep her children in touch with their ancestral culture. It grew into an introduction of Asian customs to South Georgia. Now, it also keeps these ancient traditions alive in a land far, far away from their native home.