Just a Chinese Jew and his Tefillin
I lay Tefillin every day. I don’t consider myself a particularly good Jew. I don’t wear a kipa, I don’t keep kosher and I only observe Shabbat and the holidays when I’m with other Jews, which is seldom. I can’t speak Hebrew, I don’t know the songs; most of my friends don’t even know that I’m Jewish. But against all odds, I do lay Tefillin every day.

I don’t always do it in a timely manner. I try to do it in the mornings but often I end up doing it just before sunset, because I’ve put it off all day. Sometimes I have to rush across town to make it in time, because I didn’t bring my Tefillin with me. But if that’s what I need to do, it’s what I do, because I do Tefillin every day.

I always lay Tefillin by myself because most of my friends aren’t Jews, and those who are don’t do it. My rabbi, my relatives, and anyone else that I might lay Tefillin with live far away as my Judaism is now rooted in China (and Israel of course).

It’s hard to explain and most of my friends would be confused to see me do it. If people are around, I go somewhere quiet and private. When I lay Tefillin, I am alone with God - not an abstracted idea of God, but Hashem, the Name, the God of the Hebrews. The God who instructed my ancestors to bind His word to their hands and heads, the way I do every day, the way it has been done for thousands of years. When I say the prayers, I say them just above a whisper, because I can feel the ear of God close to my lips.

Sometimes, on Shabbat, when I don’t do Tefillin, I feel the urge to pray anyway. On one of these occasions I was with a Catholic friend of mine. I told him I felt like praying and asked if he would lead us in a prayer. I had none of my own. He said we could do the Liturgy of the Hours, a progressive daily prayer that is said at dawn, morning, noon, evening, and midnight. Each of the 365 days of the calendar has 5 different prayers, and they all change each day.

When midnight came, my friend pulled out a thick leather-bound Catholic prayer book. In it, we looked up the appropriate reading for the date and time, and turned to the corresponding verse in his Bible. He began reading the prayer out loud, saying “Hear, O Israel…”

It was the Shema, the prayer I say every day when I lay Tefillin, the only prayer that I know in Hebrew from beginning to end. It had found me, on my day off.

I have never said the Liturgy of the Hours before or since. The odds that I would have been there for this recitation on that day, at that time, are 1 / 1825. The odds of that verse being chosen out of the 31,103 verses in the Christian Bible for inclusion in the Liturgy of the Hours is about 1 / 17. The combined probability of those two things happening is 1 / 31,025.

Compounding the unlikelihood of that event is the fact that I even have Tefillin at all. I am not usually one to spend money
on expensive religious implements especially since I have only recently discovered and connected with my own Judaism.

My Tefillin, again an unlikely probability, were a gift from my Rabbi, Dovi, who I know from the Chabad house in Chengdu, China. The money to purchase them was gifted to him by someone he had told my unusual story to, my story of discovering my Jewish ancestry at the age of 21, and of being Bar Mitzvahed in China at the age of 28. They asked him “This Sasson, does he have Tefillin?” When he told them no, they offered to buy them for me.

By this time, Dovi was in Israel preparing for his younger brother’s wedding. I was en route back to the US by way of Israel and Europe, and Dovi had invited me to the wedding. He received the money for my Tefillin one week before the day of the wedding. He contacted a friend of his who is a Sofer and said “I need a set of Tefillin for my friend for next week.”

The Sofer said “Are you crazy? You can’t make Tefillin in a week. It’s not like milking a cow!” But he told Dovi about a friend of his, another Sofer, who maybe could help him. Apparently, someone had ordered a set of right-handed Tefillin and never come back to claim them. He didn’t leave a name or any contact information, and so Dovi bought them.

Somehow through all this my Tefillin found their way to me, on the balcony at a frenetic Hasidic wedding in Bnei Brak in mid-summer. I was breathless and soaked with sweat from hours of dancing and went outside to get some air. Dovi pulled me aside and said “Sasson, I have surprise for you. I know you want Tefillin…” He flashed a big white smile and proudly produced a little gray cloth pouch holding the shiny black talismans. “Promise,” he said, placing them in my hands, “Promise you will do it every day.”

Please see So-Han’s piece, My Two Diasporas - On being Jewish and Chinese, in Issue 10 of Asian Jewish Life at http://asianjewishlife.org/pages/articles/AJL_Issue_10_Sept2012/AJL_WritersDesk_My2Diasporas.html