Are you Jewish?” I am asked. This is not new to me. I hear this all the time because my last name ends in “burg,” a common Jewish suffix.

So I wasn’t surprised when I heard it from Arnold, a new friend of mine from the local gym in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. He knew my last name because I had handed him my business card weeks before. And he was, after all, as bold as the espresso in the coffee shop where I met him.

When he asked me, over coffee, I shook my head and smiled. As this is not the first time I have had this conversation, I have my stock responses at hand, but yet I replied, “No, I’m not actually. I was raised Catholic. Why do you ask?”

I waited for the usual explanation — my name — but it never came. “Well, of course because you have a Chinese husband,” Arnold offered without hesitation as if he was merely stating the obvious as he casually leaned back in his chair. “You usually see Jewish women married to Chinese men.” Arnold’s words hit me like a jolt of caffeine — I’d never heard this before.

As a Western woman married to a Chinese man, I knew I was a minority when compared to the ubiquitous couples of Western men and Chinese women around the world. But all of a sudden, I wondered if I also was a minority within the world of Western wives and Chinese husbands. Was Arnold right? Do more Jewish women really love Chinese men? Could there be any truth to this? Was there a connection?

Even before I raced home to google “Jewish women” and “Chinese men,” I realized it wasn’t the first time I’d heard the words “Jewish” and “Chinese” put together. When I first visited Kaifeng, China in 1999, I learned about the city’s Sephardic Jewish community, which lasted over 700 years. Later, when I lived in Shanghai, I read a magazine article about the Jews of Shanghai, who found refuge there in the 1930s during the Holocaust.

As I scoured the Internet and the library, I found more evidence that Chinese and Chosen wasn’t just in Arnold’s head. I discovered numerous articles exploring the Jewish love affair with Chinese food, from its place in a traditional “Jewish Christmas” in the US to the existence of kosher Chinese restaurants such as Genghis Cohen and China Glatt. Deborah Jiang Stein, in her article “What’s With the Jewish Man/Asian Woman Connection, Anyway?” wrote that “Jews and Chinese have been referred to as ‘people
of the book,’ when...the intellectual
appears to be fading from the American
culture,” and mentioned “similarities in
family values and upbringing.” In the
play The Men of Mah Jongg, one man
even described this ancient Chinese
game as “invented by Chinese men and
stolen by Jewish women.”

While these connections, cuisine, history
and mahjong, were interesting, what
about actual relationships? Then I found
a study titled “In Search of the Right
Spouse: Interracial Marriage among
Chinese and Japanese Americans,”
which offered this insight:

…it appears that there is a propensity
for our interviewees to meet and date
Jews in college or in their professional
fields and marry them. Eighteen percent
of the Chinese and Japanese American
women and men we interviewed were
married to Jewish partners. Five
described how they shared a cultural
affinity with their Jewish spouses; most
often they mentioned how both
cultures valued strong family ties and
educational achievement. Interviewees
also described their Jewish spouses
as having a sense of “ethnic tradition”
and an immigrant legacy found lacking
in non-Jewish whites they had known
or dated.

Suddenly, I remembered what a
Chinese-American Ivy League graduate
once told me -- that the 80 percent of
Chinese men at his university who didn’t
date Asians dated Jewish women. While
that statistic might be difficult to verify
and is likely inflated, the statement was
nevertheless an interesting observation,
intriguing.

When I thought about it, Jewish
women wrote and produced some of
the most popular creative works about
relationships with Chinese men. Anna
Sophie Loewenberg embraced the
sons of Han in her online TV series
Sexy Beijing. Rachel DeWoskin bared
her love affairs with Chinese men --
onscreen and off -- in the book
Foreign Babes in Beijing. And Susan Blumberg-
Kason, author of All the Tea in Chicago,
is turning experiences from her former
marriage to a Chinese man into a
memoir. Did they have any answers?

Blumberg-Kason believes Chinese men
and Jewish women have such an affinity
because most Chinese are atheists,
making religion less of a family issue.

"Even though we’re now divorced, my
former husband and I just celebrated
with our son at his bar mitzvah. I think if
Jake's dad had had another religion, the
bar mitzvah might not have resonated
as much as it had. Even when Jake was
a baby, it was easier at the holidays
because we celebrated the Jewish ones
and the Chinese ones, but there was no
religious conflict between the two.”

According to DeWoskin, it’s more a
question of location. “My instinct is that
if there are more Jewish girls in love with
Chinese boys, then it’s probably the
result of Jewish girls being more likely
to come to China in the first place,” she
said, wondering if more Jews enrolled
in East Asian studies or became China
scholars like her own father.

After seeing Sexy Beijing’s two-part
“Freudian Episode,” I think Loewenberg
would agree with her.

"Why is it that I find Chinese men so
fascinating, so masculine, and so very
sexy?” Loewenberg asked. “I just can’t
seem to get over this obsession with
Chinese men. So I’m going to talk to the
one person who might be able to analyze
my neurosis -- Dr. Peter Loewenberg,
historian, psychoanalyst and my father.”

She then sits down with him at a lakeside
cafe in Hangzhou for a discussion. “Let
me ask you a psychoanalytic question,”
said Loewenberg. “What do you think
my obsession with finding a Chinese
husband has to do with my relationship
with my father, and his relationship
with his mother?”

Her father’s response, “I think you have
some identification with your father’s
Chinese childhood.” Making reference
to the fact that he and Loewenberg’s
grandparents lived in Shanghai during
the 1930s – a personal connection the
two then explore, including a search
for the old family home on Nanchang
Road. Watching this episode brought
me full circle right back to the historical
connection I examined when I first pondered the question of Jewish women and Chinese men. For Loewenberg, history was the reason, and a powerful one at that but wasn’t there more to it?

I never did find any indisputable, black-and-white statistics to answer my question. But, yet, all the evidence I uncovered lined up before me in terracotta-warrior fashion, and I couldn’t help but see the reality. Jewish women and Chinese men really do have a special connection -- probably far more than us shiksas and Chinese men ever will.

“As my father returns to America and I return to Beijing, I can’t help but wonder if perhaps one day my Chinese grandchildren will look back at the choices I made in life and love, and marvel at how their family survived the burdens of history,” said Loewenberg. I, however, had to marvel at her story. Her romance with Chinese men had such an epic background, intertwined in the history and culture her people shared with China for thousands of years. My story, on the other hand, began with a serendipitous, last-minute decision to teach in China. Nothing about my Catholic upbringing or Midwestern suburban childhood suggested I would ever end up in the arms of a Chinese man.

Then again, Loewenberg still had to make her own choices “in life and love.” Didn’t I do the same? In that sense, we belonged to the same tradition -- of Western women who dared to love China, and its men. ¶

Writer and founder of the award-winning blog Speaking of China, Jocelyn Eikenburg is one of the most prominent voices on the web for Chinese men and Western women in love. She draws on her own marriage to a Hangzhou native to explore love, family and relationships in China through her writing. Her writing credits include Matador, the Global Times and the Idaho State Journal.

Jocelyn found her passion for writing — as well as her true love — while living and working for five and a half years in China, including Zhengzhou, Hangzhou and Shanghai. A Cleveland, Ohio native, Jocelyn is currently working on a memoir about love and marriage in China.