

Wasabi Boy

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I will not be the first Asian to know that I am not Asian. Surely, I did all the easy parts, and I did them well, i.e. eat the food, play the piano, do martial arts, get straight A's in high school. Those are the prerequisites for the basic Asian™ experience.

But, they ask me, what does it take to upgrade to Asian Plus™? Do you have to sit down with a Huawei laptop, watch the most hardcore anime with a marble soda, a package of rice crackers, and a Pez dispenser? Practice tai chi while rolling sushi with a pair of chopsticks? Possibly. I never did these things.

The base subscription fee to become Asian Plus™ in the contiguous United States is much more simple than many would realize: a one-time payment of your sense of identity. Nobody has to know you lost it. No refunds, of course.

What a steal! It sounds too good to be true. There have to be some side effects or legal disclaimers. And yes, there are several ways in which my Asian™ subscription interferes with my everyday life subtly and profoundly—the side effects buried in the fine text at the bottom.

The first is that I become the subject of the perennial “Guess the Asian” game. Stand at a doorway, on the sidewalk, in a locker room as a cluster of excitable white people play cultural pin-the-tail on you while expecting appreciation for their “open-mindedness.”

I actually don't mind their racial game of darts in itself too much. It just bothers me that I'm a subject in their minds. There is an invisible, napkin-thin membrane between us. Me and them. Asian and not. They group me with the rest of Asia.

My dad tells me stories of such labels. One day, as toddler-me and my dad walked back to our car, we passed by a white man and his kid. The kid took one look at us, and said something my dad never forgot for years to come.

Wasabi.

The first time I had heard this story was at around eight or nine, and all I could imagine was walking up to my white friends and calling them “bread” or “ketchup” or something like that. It didn't seem to do the same thing in my head.

My dad would warn me about the “bad people” in faraway lands, people who light torches and houses on fire and believe they are American for doing so. They would try to tell me that I am not American. I was to tell them that I am as American as their great-great-grandfathers. Meaning, not American at all, but that was the point, wasn't it? I didn't belong. I was just a Wasabi boy.

Many years later, before I left for college, other memories of my childhood, which had been festering in a corner of my mind, resurfaced.

When I was in elementary school, my mom told me my Chinese name. Those three syllables carried a magical power for me. I paraded around school the next day telling everyone I met my name. That Chinese name represented to me a real power: a chance to belong to a heritage that had once been so alien to me. By learning that name, I would learn to read minds, or shoot lasers from my fingertips. Maybe even belong somewhere.

My name was beautiful. I had no idea what it meant.

It was my Chinese name. Yet, I could not for the life of me explain it to anyone. Alex was easy. *Protector of mankind*. A simple Google search would suffice. And my last name—I had no idea what my last name meant, either.

That evening I asked my parents what Camai meant. My dad smiled, shook his head, and said it was a story for another time. For thirteen years the question flickered like a broken lamp in the corner I had shoved it into.

Full disclosure: my surname has no cultural significance—not in the way that one would expect, at least. In Japanese it means “ready,” which really is not indicative of my prowess in karate sparring. My dad told me it means “hello” in an indigenous language neither he nor I would ever know. Thirteen-year-old me had once spent several hours prowling Ancestry.com, stuffing the word Camai into whatever search bar I saw. In the end I found maybe a distant relative in the Philippines who had long-since passed away. Friends, less-than-friends, Lyft drivers, teachers asked me what my name means, where it came from. I don’t blame them. As far as I know, my little brother and I are the first to be born of that surname. I wouldn’t know the answers to their questions for eighteen years.

“Camai. That’s, like, a really ghetto Asian name,” a girl once told me as we walked to the school parking lot. I decided to take it as a compliment at the time. Her last name was typical. It was normal—Chang, Lin, Lee, Zhang.

Time passed. The thought of college crept up and consumed me like a migraine. Spring came and went with its share of excitement and disappointment. Time ran dry. As the suitcases piled up and filled, I found myself a traveler in my own home. I asked the question again.

I had been rooting through the closet in the master bedroom (a favorite pastime of mine) and found one of my dad’s old university papers. The paper was signed “Orient Nee.”

My dad grimaced when I mentioned it to him. He told me it was a nickname given to him by his professors and classmates. Nee was the first sound of his Chinese name, but in English it was just a tag. Like Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*. Orient Nee. Nee from China. A pseudonym. It was a reminder that the Orient always came first.

I wouldn't even mind any of this not-belonging business if not for the fact that the terms and conditions for my Asian Plus™ subscription aren't exactly valid in Asia. This I found out the painful way.

The last time I visited China was in my senior year of high school, and I was old enough to remember it. My parents had planned to send us on one last circuit around their hometowns before I left for a college more than halfway across the United States.

Halfway through our trip we stopped by Maojialing, the site of a former concentration camp for Chinese revolutionaries. By the exit there stood the centerpiece, a set of partitions with the pictures of hundreds of prisoners that had been tortured and killed there. I found myself fixated on the portrait of a boy my age. I stared and he stared sternly back, as if to say *I died fighting for what I believed in. What have you done?*

My parents stood at the wall, absorbed every picture, every face, almost teared up.

"You probably don't feel the same kind of pride we do, Alex. It's okay. It's something only people from China can understand," my dad said.

They probably were referring to the fact that the United States supported the Kuomintang over Mao's rebels during the Revolution, but they were still right. Those faces on the wall saw my parents, and they called Brother, Sister. But they saw me, and saw an American. *Měi guó rén.*

When we visited the graves of my dad's parents to pay respects, it was one of the few times I ever saw him cry. We were below a large bridge, deep in a wooded copse where the mosquitoes orbited in clouds around my ankles. I bowed my head at the mossy stone dug into the hill. I prayed as I was told to do. I told the grandparents I had never met that I was lost. I told them I didn't know where I belonged. Where would I go? What should I do?

I opened my eyes. My uncles were burning ceremonial money, comically-large US bills with the devil in each corner. I couldn't read the inscriptions. I don't know Chinese. I understood then that even if I do learn Chinese I will never know what it was like to go to school here, to wade in the rice paddies and pick leeches off my calves. That napkin-thin membrane rippled in front of me, and reminded me of all I couldn't touch. The firecrackers danced and crackled, jarring me back to my senses.

The name Camai has no equivalent in Chinese. My dad changed his name when he first came to the United States. My parents bestowed this name on me for a reason I have come to understand. The name on the gravestone back in China was what his last name used to be, will always be. But my friends, our neighbors, my teachers know him as Mr. Camai. And so I will be known. Just a fragment of something larger. Something different. Something incomplete.

Camai. Spell it backwards.

I am a C.