

POSTEVERYTHING

Why do my co-workers keep confusing me with other people? Because I'm Asian.

Yes, it's usually done without malice. No, that does not make it okay.



By Iris Kuo

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“Hey,” a co-worker said. “Did you ask IT for help?”

“Yes,” I said. “How did you know?”

The IT guy had gone over to another co-worker’s desk to coach her on commands in Excel — a request I had put in. Why had the IT guy confused me with Chunzi? For the same reason Chunzi’s checks ended up on my desk, my mail ended up in her hands and an editor asked me about my trips to New York, which I never took but Chunzi did. It’s because we’re both young Asian women.

We look nothing alike, of course. And it’s not something that happens only to us. Recently two white male journalists mistook my friend Ruth, a fellow Asian American journalist, for me, even though she and I no longer live in the same city. Another time a publicist enthusiastically called Ruth by my name while she was wearing a name tag supplied by the publicist. And a few years ago, a waitress dropped off my check and credit card — except they belonged to another person with an Asian-sounding name.

All my life I’ve been mistaken for other people of my race. It’s a degrading and thoughtless error that boils away my identity and simplifies me as one thing: “that Asian.” One reason is that our society has so few Asians and people of color in positions of prominence that some people have little exposure to them. Diversity is so lacking in film and television that a director thinks it’s okay to cast a white person as Chinese, as Cameron Crowe did with Emma Stone in “Aloha,” and the Hollywood Reporter mistakes “Master of None” actor Kelvin Yu for show co-creator Alan Yang, who [tweeted](#) in response, “Same race, different dude.”

This is not unique to Asians. The Golden Globes' Twitter account mistook America Ferrera for Gina Rodriguez, and the media regularly mixes up black public figures: TMZ confused Nene and Mary J. Blige; a local reporter mistook Samuel L. Jackson for Laurence Fishburne; George Stephanopoulos identified Bill Russell as Morgan Freeman.

People look at us without really seeing us. Instead, they simply see our race.

This phenomenon has a name — psychologists call it the “cross-race effect,” a well-replicated finding that people are better at telling apart faces of their own race than those of another race. It becomes an even bigger problem in court: Witnesses are more likely to misidentify an alleged perpetrator of another race. Sixty-six of 216 wrongful convictions overturned by DNA testing involved the use of cross-racial eyewitness identifications, according to the Innocence Project. And white participants in one study were significantly more likely to experience a cross-race effect than black participants.

Yes, it rarely happens out of malice. Yes, it is often accidental. Yes, it is bumbling, careless, idiotic and unintentional. But it is absolutely not right.

After receiving yet another one of Chunzi's checks on my desk, I wrote a terse email to human resources and copied our managing editor. “These mistakes,” I wrote, “are extremely offensive and unacceptable.” The managing editor called me into his office to apologize, but he rationalized the situation: “I don't think anyone here's got a mean bone in their body,” he said.

This is part of the problem: White people and even Asians themselves dismiss the issue. We laugh at it because it's not malicious. The Asian women I've spoken to have largely rolled their eyes when this has happened or have tried to be good-humored about it. (Several Asian women I know have switched seats with the other Asians in their offices to see if their white male bosses noticed; they didn't.) America Ferrera and Eva Longoria recently made fun of these types of errors in a routine at the Golden Globes.

Nicole Chung, writing in the Toast, calls these experiences “casual racism” and notes that, as minorities, we are often afraid of how white people will feel if we call them out. “What does our dignity matter, what do our feelings amount to, when we could *embarrass* white people we care about? When our white relatives or friends or colleagues might experience a moment's discomfort, anxiety, or guilt?” she writes.

People talk now of unconscious bias, which sounds more innocuous than racism. (It's a particularly popular buzzword at tech companies, which have notoriously non-diverse staffs.) “You can't call it racist,” one friend said. “It'll just turn people off.” Another friend opined, “It's just stepping over social poop piles white people leave.” But in important ways, it is a kind of racism: People swap you for other Asians. They leave a Chinese calendar on your desk (happened to a friend). They grill you about where you're “from.” They ask dumb questions, make dumb statements. Whether or not it's done out of malice is irrelevant. It's rude, and it's racial.

I don't know how to separate myself from other Asians in the eyes of white people. Develop a more unmistakable personality? Embarrass and call them out? The stakes are real at work — I worry that the reputation of another person will be ascribed to me or that an accomplishment of mine will be attributed to another Asian in the office. But if I speak up, I'm afraid I'll disrupt the peace or make a white person uncomfortable, even if they deserve it. I also worry that if I keep quiet, I will explode out of anger from the litany of microaggressions.

"You're so pretty," a woman at a concert told me. "My son is marrying a Vietnamese girl. Are you Vietnamese?"

You're so pretty, too! I wanted to say. *My cousin is marrying a white guy from Tennessee. Are you from Tennessee?* But I didn't say it.

Sometimes I'm so stunned by what's happening that I'm at a loss for words — like when a man on the subway announced to me, apropos of nothing, "I was just in Shanghai last week!" But this won't stop until we learn to speak up. Part of that includes being brave enough to call this phenomenon for what it is: racist. But the onus isn't just on us inching past our fear of embarrassing a white person. It's on white people to learn to make distinguishing faces a priority. Whether they realize it or not, the repeated misidentification broadcasts its own message: I'm Asian, indistinct and not worth remembering.