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MY TURN

■ Wayne Chan



The know it all who really doesn't know

We went out with some friends for dinner the other night and I was a nervous wreck.

I should be used to it by now. It's a condition I've had to deal with my entire life, but for whatever reason, I just can't get over it.

The malady I am suffering from is *Only Asian-itis*. It's a disorder that occurs whenever I'm in a social situation with a group of non-Asians and I'm expected to be the all-knowing expert on everything Asian. The symptoms are even more severe when we're at a Chinese restaurant.

I've dealt with *Only Asian-itis* my entire life. I suppose it's a condition I should have adapted to long ago.

Growing up, whatever school I was in, I always felt a bit like the odd man out. I was nearly always the only Asian in school. Oh sure, in elementary school, I wasn't completely alone. There was Stacy Hayashi, but having one other Asian in school didn't really make things better. With Stacy being a girl, everyone in school assumed that, even at six years old, we were two peas in a pod and were destined to be together forever living in wedded bliss.

So back to the story. There we were, in one of the best Chinese restaurants in town, having dinner with four of our nicest neighbors, all of whom are Caucasian. Both couples had recently taken Maya and me out to dinner, and we thought it would be nice to return the favor. They had taken us out for Italian and American cuisine, and they suggested that we choose a good Chinese restaurant. Sounds easy enough, right?

But *Only Asian-itis* sufferers are acutely aware that I've just stumbled into the worst-case scenario of the condition. I'm starting to break out in hives just thinking about it.

It starts out pretty harmless. I ask, "Is there anything you guys don't eat?"

One of them says they've never really liked tofu, because it has no flavor. Another says they're not used to eating a whole fish, while another says they

were a little freaked out when they ordered shrimp and the head was still on it.

Easy enough — nix the tofu and we'll stick with headless fish fillets and decapitated shrimp. Obviously some people don't like eating food that's looking at them when they're eating. So, maybe they're in a bit of denial, but who am I to judge?

It's really after the food starts to arrive that it gets tough.

I'm inundated with questions they all assume I have answers to and for some reason, I'm hesitant to let on that I don't have a clue. They begin peppering me with questions like:

- Wayne, why is northern Chinese food so much spicier than food from southern China?*
- Wayne, what is the dumpling skin made out of?*
- Wayne, how is the food here compared to China?*
- Wayne, why is soup being served as the last dish of the meal?*
- Wayne, who is General Tso and why is his chicken so famous?*
- Wayne, how did Chinese people start eating with chopsticks?*

I think my exact responses were:

Umm ... Maybe Maya knows ... half a dozen of one or six of another ... it has something to do with an emperor ... I think Confucius once said ... Uhh, I could tell you, but my Feng Shui master advised against answering.

One of our friend's ancestors is Italian, but if we go out to an Italian restaurant, I don't ask why gnocchi is spelled with a "g" or who first thought of putting cream in a cannoli.

At some point, as I'm drowning in questions, I just blurt out, "Look! I was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan! Just outside of Detroit! How am I supposed to know?"

I have to give myself a little credit, though. I actually do know the answers to most of those questions. But Googling the answers hardly makes me the "go-to guy" when it comes to Chinese culture.

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