

How 'Subtle Asian Traits' Became a Global Hit

A group of Asian-Australian students started a Facebook group to share jokes and memes about their experiences. Now, it has nearly a million followers all over the world.



By Isabella Kwai

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SYDNEY, Australia — The Facebook group was supposed to be a fun distraction from high school exams.

Its creators, a crew of Melbourne students who had bonded over weekends in Chinese language school, had noticed a Facebook group called “Subtle Private School Traits.”

They started joking about their own experiences: the struggles and joys of being a first-generation immigrant.

“We were like, what if we made a ‘Subtle Asian Traits’ page,” said Anne Gu, 18.

The concept was simple: Share jokes about the traits, subtle or otherwise, that characterized the Asian-Australian experience, from cultural clashes with parents and the sanctity of bubble milk tea, to the groan-worthy pickup lines from white men on dating apps. (Are you from Asia? Because I’m China get your number.)

In September, they created a Facebook group and added their friends, expecting it would live and die within the young, Asian community in Melbourne.

But as memes and jokes flowed, the follower count soared. Now, it’s edging close to 1 million followers, spawning spinoffs, and catapulting the conversation to the United States, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong and the Netherlands.

“It kept on growing and we couldn’t believe it ourselves,” said Ms. Gu. “It’s tapped into something.”

That something is potent, young and international.

Powered by global immigration and the borderless procrastination magnet of social media, the Facebook group has become a gathering place for laughs and reflection on the complicated experience of first generation Asian immigrants who have grown up reconciling the expectations of their heritage and the identity of the country they call home.

“We’ve been brought up in the in-between,” said Angela Kang, 21, another co-founder. And in the group that background is the norm.

“Everyone’s just more supportive,” she said. “Everyone understands.”

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Anne Gu recalled a memory that reflects the kind of experiences driving the group. One day at her private high school, her teacher discovered she didn’t speak Mandarin or Cantonese at home, but Shanghaiese — one of more than 100 dialects.

“He stopped the whole class and asked if everyone knew there was a different dialect,” she said.

She said she doesn’t mind that her friends ask her about her heritage, although answering questions can be “a bit tedious.”

The endless stream of memes in the “Subtle Asian Traits” group provides relief — it’s a chance to belong for once without having to try.

“We don’t have to explain stuff,” she said.



“It kept on growing and we couldn’t believe it ourselves,” said Anne Gu, 18, one of the founders. “It’s insane,” she said, “it’s tapped into something.”
Christina Simons for The New York Times

That sense of shared ease is an especially compelling draw in Australia, where an increasingly multicultural population exists alongside a largely white power structure. For many young Asian Australians, it can be hard not to internalize the perceived hierarchy, especially when immigration is becoming a more contentious issue ahead of next year’s federal election.

“It’s so hard because part of us wants to fit in and be in the crowd and be like them,” said Ms. Gu, of Anglo-Australians. “I’ve felt sad about who we are, where we come from, and just the identity that we hold.”

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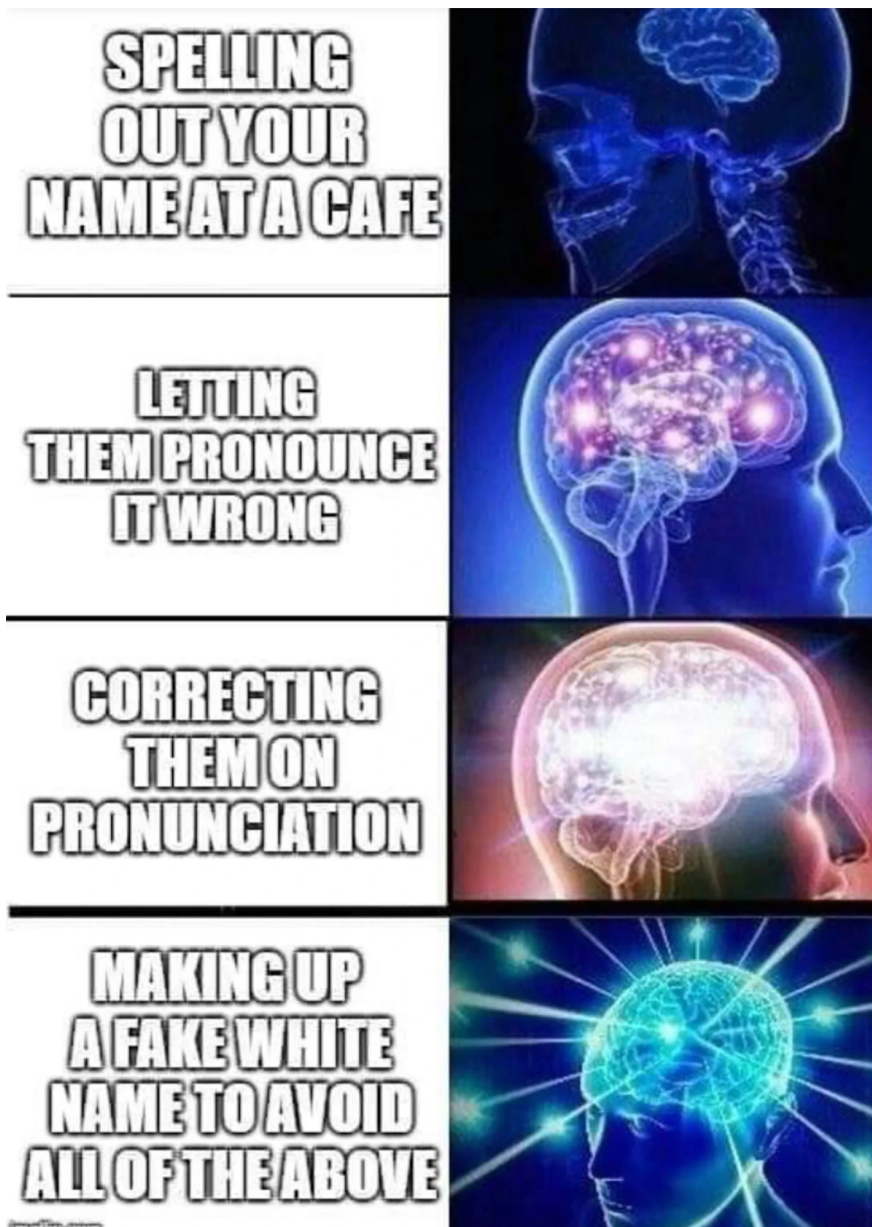
And in Subtle Asian Traits, those differences are not so different after all; they’re the norm.

Everyday friends tag each other in memes that weigh in on a wide range of experiences. In one example an Expanding Brain meme plots the perils of ordering coffee with an ethnic name. In another, the joke is pitting lactose intolerance, a condition common among the Asian population, against milk tea.

me: im not like Really lactose intolerant i just get a lil stomach ache its fine ill drink this extra large milk tea
me, an hour later:



One of the memes posted on the Facebook group "Subtle Asian Traits."



Another meme posted on the Facebook group.

These memes — witty, visual and catered to the audience — have powered the group's explosive growth by allowing self-reflection.

"Memes express a culture's belief, they tell its stories, they pass along these narratives from person to person," said Dr. Justine Humphry, a lecturer in digital cultures at the University of Sydney.

The simple act itself of sharing a meme and being able to decode it positions people as insiders within a culture, she added.

"Those kinds of practices — of sharing and creating jokes that are readable within a community — are actually very, very powerful," she said.

Underneath the humor, weightier issues have become a topic of group discussion, such as the differing expressions of love across cultures and families. One woman shared a meme from the group with her mother, which led to a surprising conversation.

"Subtle Asian Traits got me my first 'I love you' from my mom so I'd like to thank you all for that," she posted.

Careful moderation of the group, which has set its tone, is a key factor of the group's success, said Dr. Humphry. Members wanting to submit content to Subtle Asian Traits must first have their post approved by an administrator.

"They provide a place where these kinds of conversations can be a lot more playful and a lot more experimental," she said.

These days, about 3,000 posts daily keep the moderators busy, with all pitching in.

Ms. Kang often scrolls through posts while on the train to university. Some days, she will sit at the computer for hours, approving posts, with the volume not dropping. "By the time I approve one post, four posts will come in," she said.

Some people in the group have criticized Subtle Asian Traits for being too focused on the Chinese and Vietnamese diaspora. "We have noticed that, we're not going to deny that," said Ms. Kang, adding most of the posts they receive are for those communities, though they are encouraging other communities to contribute.

In the meantime, others have taken matters into their own hands. A group for the South Asian diaspora called Subtle Curry Traits has gained momentum. There is Subtle Christian Traits, Subtle Korean Traits. There are even Subtle Asian Dating and Subtle Asian Mates.



"We've been brought up in the in-between," said Angela Kang, another co-founder.
Christina Simons for The New York Times

The group has also weathered accusations that it reinforces self-hating stereotypes or being racist toward white people. Tan Falconer, the founder of another Facebook group popular among Asian-Australians, said that while the group's jokes are empowering, "it's empowering Asians in not a really good way because it's belittling other races."

The group's founders say they are keeping a close eye on the fun. They are screening posts for racism and even clamping down on memes referring to "gweilo," a Cantonese slur for white people.

People of all ethnicities are welcome in the group so long as they abide by the rules. "We want to keep it as a safe space for everyone," said Ms. Gu.

For its creators, both the challenges and the success of the group are shocking. They have already received several offers to buy the group. For now, they have all refused.

"I'm not in it for the money, I'm not greedy," said Ms. Kang, a third-year university student who is studying to be in the medical imaging field. "We're just a group of teenagers doing it for fun."

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