

# How to Be a Good Chinese-Jewish Hapa

by [Kim Liao](#) • [Vintage Fringe](#) • [Issue 31](#) • 06.11.2012

Pause at the checkboxes. Hover above them, blue ballpoint pen in hand, as you read the choices offered. After your name, address, and social security number, the Common Application for Undergraduate College Admission requests one last piece of identifying information:

What is your racial or ethnic background? (*Please check all that apply.*)

White

Black, non Hispanic

Asian or Pacific Islander

American Indian or Alaskan Native

Hispanic

Other (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

Carefully peruse the possibilities. Imagine your fellow high school seniors—a homogeneous representation of the primarily Irish and German Catholic town where you grew up—glibly checking off “White” as they sail through the seemingly cut-and-dry “Personal Information” section of the application. Realize this is the first time you’ve had to articulate the precise nature of the distance you always felt from them. Try to decide which combination of checkboxes will most accurately sum up your identity.

For as long as you can remember, no one could ever pronounce your last name. It’s taken you seventeen years to cultivate the patient, withering stare and nod you deploy when someone inevitably asks, “What, are you Asian or something?” You’ve stopped looking for your Chinese grandmother’s eyes in your reflection in the mirror. Your mother’s European traits dominate your face, but there is something that no one can ever quite put their finger on; an “exotic flair.” Sunscreen was never necessary. People have looked at your olive-toned skin and asked, “What are you?” Guesses have run the gamut: Hispanic, Hawaiian, Greek, Vietnamese, and once, Turkish.

Compare your background to the checkboxes. Wonder if “Jewish” is different somehow than “White.” Recall when once, as a child, a friend’s older sister said scornfully, “Jewish isn’t an ethnicity. You can be from England. You can’t be from ‘Jew-land.’” Practice filling out the form with a confident swath of blue handwriting:

Asian or Pacific Islander

Other (Please specify: Russian Jewish)

Repeat your answer on every application you fill out. Tell yourself that consistency is the first requirement for any credible story.

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One year later in California, embrace the opportunity to reinvent yourself in a sea of college freshmen. Make the most diverse friends of your life thus far. Flinch when your Vietnamese friend Nick says it’s too bad that you’re

“not Asian enough” to go to a dance at the Asian American Students Association. Laugh it off. Tell him he’s too short for you anyway.

Flirt. Go to Hillel events with your first crush, a nice Jewish pre-med named Adam. Nod like you know what “Hookah in the Sookah” means. Worry that you might not be pretty enough; realize later that by “pretty” you really meant “Jewish.” Date a half-Mexican guy named Daniel. Live vicariously through the details of what you consider his rich ethnic heritage. Ride with him to the airport when you leave for Christmas break. After you board your separate planes, imagine him eating tamales with his aunts, uncles, and cousins on a sunny ranch in Texas. Look forward to dim sum dinners in Chinatown and pastrami sandwiches on Long Island, and envy the solidity of Daniel’s traditions and the unified family who celebrates them.

Learn from your classmates about an emerging multiracial community group on campus. Endlessly dissect the word hapa; originally meaning “half” or “part” in Hawaiian, it now can also mean “mixed Asian” in California—much to the chagrin of several Hawaiians who claim that their language has been corrupted by “California Wanna Be Hapas.” Wonder why a description for multiracial identity has to be imported from somewhere else. Wonder if hapa is only really applicable in Hawaii, or if you too, can wear the label for just a little longer, until a better one comes along.

Decide against joining the multiracial group. Tell yourself that you’re not ready to publicly overanalyze your identity. Worry that you’re “not mixed enough.” Immerse yourself in courses in European literature, philosophy, and drama. Avoid words like “ethnic,” “postcolonial,” “feminist,” and “diaspora.” Savor the stark neutrality of the white, male-dominated academic discourse that you see the world through like a pane of clear glass. Stand looking out that window, nose pressed up against the glass, long enough that you almost forget what shape your nose really is.

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Graduate from college. Move back to the East Coast, get your first apartment, and learn to cook. Make your Chinese-American father teach you how to cook rice without a rice cooker, using his “ancient Chinese recipe.” Scoff when your friend who studied physics in college says that the method is unscientific; cite 2,000 years of cooked rice as repeatable results. Measure the water with your index finger joint, and imagine a Chinese housewife in the Ming dynasty holding up her finger next to yours. Cook rice often.

Date white guys while you harbor only a hint of lingering anxiety about marrying someone who will water down your Asian blood. Wonder why you don’t worry about watering down your Russian-Jewish blood. Remember Daniel’s family traditions and how you sometimes found yourself imagining your hypothetical “double-hapa” kids—the children of two mixed parents. Wonder what kinds of family traditions you will someday create for your American family.

Cook potato latkes for your roommates and think of how your Jewish grandparents would be proud. Wander the aisles of Super 88, the huge Asian supermarket in Boston, doing your “Asian grocery shopping.” Deliberate between five bewildering kinds of bok choy. Scrutinize the long cases of frozen shrimp dumplings. See yourself in the reflection of the glass door—your face blank as you stare into one small corner of a culture you always hoped to carry with you, unintelligible as an ancient Sumerian stone tablet.

Admit finally that Chinese culture is as foreign to you as the sands of Israel, and as the forests of Russia where your great-grandfather hid when he escaped the Czar’s army in 1912 to come to America. Maybe if it were easier to claim an ethnicity as your own, it wouldn’t be worth so much.

Choose a package of shrimp dumplings at random and pay for your purchases. Bring your thin pink plastic bag home and unpack it in your kitchen. Store the dumplings in your freezer, next to the frozen hash browns you use for latkes and the low fat toaster waffles you eat for breakfast, and relax a little about forming your own traditions. They will come in time. They are forming already—the beauty and the curse of living like a good hapa.



## Kim Liao

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Kim Liao was a 2010-2011 Fulbright Taiwan Research Fellow, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She received her MFA at Emerson College, and her creative nonfiction has appeared in *Fourth River*, *Hippocampus*, *Cha: A Journal of Asian Literature*, *Newtown Literary*, and others. She is currently finishing her first book, *In Search of Formosa*, a family memoir and adventure story. Kim lives in New York City with her umbrella tree plant.