Who am I?

I was about to discover the answer to that very question. It was get-your-Chinese-name-day, a day that I'd looked forward to anxiously since the beginning of the semester.

I didn't always look forward to learning Chinese. In fact, I chose Chinese out of necessity – the necessity to pass a foreign language for my bachelor's degree. Having successfully avoided the study of foreign languages as a youth, I realized I could no longer avoid the inevitable and opened the foreign language section of the university course guide, proceeding while closing my eyes to plant my finger. Assuming failure as the ultimate outcome, I didn't overly concern myself with the consequences of this haphazard design. When I realized that my finger had landed on Chinese, I comforted myself with the fact that 500 million women live in China, and that my chances of meeting and speaking with them would be vastly improved. Surprisingly, Chinese was easier to learn than I'd imagined, proving to be a most useful asset for both my educational and extracurricular goals.

I watched as Professor Wang, our Mandarin instructor, entered class. He made his way to the podium at the front of the room and flipped through the papers he had been holding tightly under his left arm. As he organized the papers, he pulled out a single sheet, one that contained a list of Chinese names he painstakingly fashioned to reveal our new identities.

"Good morning," he declared. "Today I will distribute your Chinese names." Excited and nervous, I watched as Professor Wang stepped forward, list in hand, and pointed to the first student to be transformed. "Your name is Equal to Confucius." An audible gasp of approving oohhs and aahhs filled the room as he proceeded to write the Chinese characters on the board.

After explaining the components of each character, Professor Wang pointed to the next student and said, "Your name is Woman of Beauty." Again, approving squeals of delight filled the room, and characters were written and explained.

Similar names followed for other students: Man of Strength, Beautiful Flower, Man of Intelligence, Full of Wisdom, Great Prosperity, all reflecting the physical and psychological attributes Professor Wang beheld in each student.

The names evoked a sense of ancient tradition, and I eagerly awaited hearing and seeing my new name. Finally, after distributing all but the last name, Professor Wang pointed to me, filling me with a sense of awe. Time stood still for a moment as I awaited the pronouncement that would include me in the ranks of my newly wise-beautiful-strong-intelligent classmates. "Your name," he said, "is Pine Mud."

"What the hell," I thought. "Did he just say Pine Mud?"

The laughter from my classmates filling my ears confirmed that he had indeed said "Pine Mud."

I was dumbfounded. What kind of name was that? The guy in the front row was Equal to Confucius. Next to him was Woman of Beauty.

"Pine Mud?" I thought. "I'm Pine Mud?"

Professor Wang didn't realize it, but in that single utterance, he destroyed any possibility that I might ever have with any of the five hundred million women living in China, or, for that matter, the three and a half billion women worldwide. Imagine the response to: *"Hi, my name is Pine Mud. What's yours?"*

The disappointment on my face, coupled with my classmates' hysterical laughter, communicated to Professor Wang that his pronouncement might have missed the mark culturally. He quickly moved towards the board to write and explain the components of the characters. Devastated, I looked on as Professor Wang explained the origins of my new identity:

“In Chinese, *Bei Songni* (貝松泥) is a transliteration of your family name, Besozzi. The *Bei* (貝) means shell, like a seashell. However, it holds no significant meaning for your name. It’s like your last name, but in China, it comes first. *Songni* (松泥) is your given name. The *song* (松) means pine, and the *ni* (泥) means mud. I chose these characters because I thought they reflected your personality.”

Again, giggles and laughter followed from Equal to Confucius, Woman of Beauty, and my other newly prosperous-flowery-strong-intelligent classmates. Sensing my disappointment, Professor Wang proceeded to elaborate:

“The Chinese believe in the five elements of earth, water, fire, wood, and metal. *Song* (松) represents wood, and *ni* represents water and earth. When you put them together, you get mud, and mud gives life to the tree. That's why a pine tree is a symbol of long life in China.”

Silence filled the room. Man of Intelligence, Woman of Beauty, and the others were contemplating the significance of Professor Wang’s words. Although my new name was an embarrassment at first, I was beginning to think it was a reasonable moniker. Equal to Confucius, Man of Strength, Beautiful Flower, Full of Wisdom, Great Prosperity, and all the others had received such majestic names, but the grandiosity reflected a sense of homogeneity that made them definitively ordinary. Pine Mud, on the other hand, was singularly unique, and so newly enlightened, I was ready to proclaim my new identity to the world:

“Hi, my name is Pine Mud. What’s yours?”