

## ALBERT TAN CHIN HAN

by Amos Kwok

### I. Ah Boy

Albert Tan Chin Han didn't have a name he could call his own. There was the name printed on his identity card, but no one ever called him that. His mother addressed him as Ah Boy. His only sibling, an older sister named Angela, didn't call him at all or when she did, it was Tee or Idiot. But she was careful to avoid disparaging names in front of their father because he believed names had the power to influence a person's life and shape their personality. He insisted his children bear Christian names because it was easier to succeed in life if one possessed a name everyone could pronounce. He himself lacked an English name, so when he was 20, he added James to his name (though he didn't make it legal). James Tan Quee Neng wanted the same advantage for his children and took pains to select the perfect names for them. Angela, he chose because he liked female names that began and ended with the letter A. Albert to him was a strong and prosperous name. If it was good enough for Queen Elizabeth's husband, it was good enough for his son. Best of all, it also began with the letter A. Indeed, in school, teachers and schoolmates called him Albert. He performed well academically, often earning praise from the teachers. He had

numerous friends who made sure he attended the social functions they organised. Albert's father nodded sagely at his son's success. It was the name he claimed, giving power. As proof of the obverse, there was one subject that Albert didn't succeed at. His father insisted it was because the teacher employed the name Jinghan. Albert claimed it was because the family didn't speak Mandarin at home. He didn't buy into his father's theory but it wasn't long before he changed his mind.

## II. Chen Jinghan

Midway through his school career, the authorities made a decision that caused a seismic shift in his personality—they changed his name. The principal explained the change was part of the government's attempt at encouraging the use of Mandarin. With that decree, Albert was now Chen Jinghan. As Jinghan, he didn't feel more Chinese. Rather, it was more like inhabiting another person's body. He was ill-prepared for the role and his school performance suffered. When he was a Tan, blackboard questions weren't daunting because the teachers called up the students alphabetically to answer them. He had time to consult textbooks and other classmates. As a Chen, he was second to the board. He soon lost count of the occasions when the teachers reprimanded him for a tardy response. He protested to his teachers, explained that Chen wasn't his surname and pleaded for a reinstatement of his true name. He pleaded with every teacher until his request reached the principal. His father

joined him for that meeting and explained his theory about the power of names. The principal commiserated but refused to make any exceptions. It was the ministry's policy; it was cast in stone. When they left the office, his father swore under his breath but advised his son to make the best of the situation. Jinghan knew those words were only a brave front. He would have to soldier on under a false identity.

### III. Al Tan

His fortunes improved at junior college when the ministry abandoned the Hanyu Pinyin naming convention. He suspected it was because such names hadn't made an iota of difference to how the Chinese were using (or more precisely, not using) Mandarin. With great joy, he told the officials who had come to the college to update identity cards that he preferred to revert to Albert Tan Chin Han. And that was the name printed on the little pink plastic card. He'd reclaimed his rightful name and began introducing himself as Al. The nickname had a casual ring to it; Al sounded amiable and gave the impression of confidence. Simply hearing others call him "Al!" boosted his morale and on his report card, his form teacher remarked on his self-assurance. These comments never failed to raise his mother's eyebrows as she looked up from the report card to stare at the pimply-faced teenager in front of her. His father wasn't the least bit surprised as he scrawled a bold signature across the card.

Al joined the tennis team, the debating society and even became a councillor. As for the girls, he had enough dates marked on the wall calendar for it to resemble an elaborate tic tac toe game.

In his second year, Al hooked up with a girl named Seraphina. They met after an inter-schools tennis match that Al had won. She came up to compliment him on his victory as he packed away his racquets. He had seen her around college (as did all the guys) but had never spoken to her. He was surprised that someone as pretty as her wanted to talk to him. The swell of her bosom, her straight hair flowing down the middle of her back and her apple cheeks mesmerised him. She appeared to enjoy his company and he was happy to be her companion. When she wanted something from him, she stroked his arm and called him Al-bert, stretching the first syllable the time it took to run a manicured fingertip along the length of his forearm. It was a thrill whenever she did that. She permitted him to call her Sera in private but not in front of others because the truncation wasn't as exotic as the full name.

It took him half a year to admit that Sera was the only one enjoying their relationship, receiving affection and gifts while all he got in return were a few photos and bragging rights. It was time to end their friendship. As they celebrated with two glasses of iced Milo in the canteen after their final mid-year paper, Al thought it was the perfect time to break up. Instead, Sera informed him she was seeing someone else. He felt gut-punched. When he pressed for details, she revealed that her new guy was also an Al, but it was short for Alistair. The next few days he spent in a haze of self-doubt, bitter

that a more exotic Al had bested him. He was glad when the June holidays arrived. He holed up in his room, thankful he didn't have to hear anyone calling his name.

Back in school after break, he shunned the company of his schoolmates and withdrew from the debating team. Not long after that, he pulled out from the tennis team when his groundstrokes kept flying wild and almost resigned his post as a councillor. (Almost because the president took pity and let him slip by without doing any real work.) He ended college miserable, barely able to focus on his 'A' Levels.

#### IV. PTE Tan Chin Han

His life unravelled further with National Service. The army issued him an olive green, Velcro name tag with the letters C H Tan stitched on it. Corporals, sergeants and lieutenants started calling him Tan! (The exclamation point was part of the new name.) Just as it was with Chen, he often failed to respond. There were four other Tans in the platoon so how did he know when they were summoning him? If only the NCOs called him Al, he wouldn't be spending so much time with palms on tarmac, eyes fixed on his own drops of fallen perspiration as he did push ups while shouting out his surname. To his platoon mates, his name was Ah Tan ah! It took him two weeks to realise this three-syllable name referred to him. With another forced identity change, Tan's

National Service performance floundered and he began hating every minute he spent in the No.4 uniform.

After BMT, he was posted to an infantry unit where he laid low. But his plan derailed when the unit commander organised a social function that everyone had to attend with a date. (Sisters and first cousins didn't count.) The idea of a date struck fear in Tan. He hadn't gone out with anyone since Seraphina. Panic prickled him as he struggled to recall the names of the other girls he'd dated back in college. Riffing through the yearbook and an outdated Filofax, he dug up half a dozen phone numbers. When he telephoned, the girls were still cordial but none was willing to attend an army social event. His buddy, Sonny, noticed his agitation and asked about it. Tan limned the whole sorry tale about his luck with women. Sonny nodded and the next time they were allowed access to the one public phone at their company line, he phoned his sister.

Her name was Hsien Chern. She was two years younger, loved her Chinese language lessons in school, played the flute in the Chinese orchestra and read novels by Jin Yong. The first time Tan saw her was on the night of the function. When he rang the doorbell of Sonny's flat in Balestier, he found himself face to face with a girl in a shimmery cheongsam, her hair tied in an elaborate bun, the air about her redolent of jasmine.

"I'm Albert," he stuttered but when she smiled, his uneasiness disappeared like shadows when the lights come on.

“I’m Hsien Chern.” She shook hands with him. “May I ask what your dialect name is?” He felt he’d missed a beat but she was waiting so he blurted, “Chin Han.”

“That’s a sweet name,” she said. “Your initials are C H and mine are H C.” She appeared pleased with this discovery and ushered him into the flat. A room door opened and Sonny stepped out, adjusting a necktie on a suit that looked right out of the ’70s.

“Chin Han is here,” announced Hsien Chern.

“Who?” Sonny looked confused then shook his head when he saw his platoon mate sitting stiffly in a borrowed coat and tie. “Sorry Tan,” he said, “my sister likes to call people by their dialect names. Chern, call him Albert. He calls me Sonny.”

Hsien Chern glanced up. “First of all, your name is not Sonny and second, I think Chin Han is a nice name.”

Albert had never heard anyone (not even his father) comment that his dialect name was nice. It was the first time his dialect name was an asset. They trooped downstairs and headed over to Bishan in a taxi where Kah Fai (as Hsien Chern insisted on calling her brother) picked up his date. Along the way, Hsien Chern asked Chin Han about himself and he supplied details. He barely noticed Kah Fai’s date, so engrossed was he with Hsien Chern. By the time the taxi arrived at camp, the two of them were ensconced in their world. But in the function hall, he was embarrassed by the waggish behaviour of his platoon mates. They buzzed around him, pestering him for a chance to dance, talk,

ogle at his date. He swatted them away, despairing at their manners but pleased that his standing in camp had received a meteoric boost. Hsien Chern took the raucous jokes in stride. “Don’t worry, I’ve a brother in the army,” she’d say whenever he cast a worried glance in her direction.

From that evening on, Chin Han’s world revolved around an axis made of the army and Hsien Chern. When he booked out on weekends, he would follow Kah Fai home where he spent all of the day and much of the evening before returning to home by the sodium vapour glow of the streetlamps. Hsien Chern introduced him to the music of Guo Fu Chen, Zhang Guo Rong, Liu De Hua and Ye Qian Wen. He watched movies made in Hong Kong and the occasional art house weepy from Taiwan. He armed himself with a Chinese-English dictionary but still found himself several seconds behind Hsien Chern when laughing at a joke because the subtitles weren’t accurate. It was a cultural shift for him but he did his best to enjoy the experience. He knew she was the one keeping him sane through NS. And when it was time to do the celebratory lap around the parade square yelling, “ORD loh!” and head to university, he imagined things could only improve.

#### V. Albert Tan

University, however, was a shock. Having left his brain idle on a diet of coarse Hokkien jokes, Jackie Chan flicks and Canto pop lyrics, he struggled in the unrelenting academic tide. He was enrolled in electrical engineering but

could hardly master Windows 3.1. While his classmates cruised through lectures and tutorials, he swam against an undertow, trying to keep his head from going under. At the end of the first semester, his grades were sunk. Hsien Chern comforted him, saying he had only come out of the army; he was going through an adjustment and would get better when he became more accustomed to varsity life. Her eupeptic talk buoyed him but when the second semester commenced, reality weighed him down once more.

As he struggled with the latest assignment, he reminisced about the early college days when he was performing well. He made an effort to replicate that success. He employed the same studying methods, arranged his desk the same way (with the same snacks lined up on the edge), and mugged at the same time of the night. Nothing improved. What was missing? He studied his old report cards. Then it dawned on him and his pulse quickened. It was so obvious. How had he missed it? He hurried to the computer and worked on the assignment's cover page. He usually did that last but this time it was critical to do it first. After the cover sheet cascaded out of the printer, he felt rejuvenated. His mind buzzed with ideas, synapses fired, and soon he was racing through the assignment.

When the tutor returned the report, he wasn't surprised by the grade. He jounced through the corridors for the first time since arriving on campus and found Hsien Chern at their usual canteen table. She looked up expectantly. Like a Primary One student handing over his first report card, he passed her the

assignment. Her face lit up when she saw the grade then fell as her eyes travelled to the bottom of the cover page.

“What?” He was worried. He wanted her to see that he was intelligent, capable, and as bright as she was.

“Your name on the cover.” She prodded the assignment. The name on the cover read: Albert Tan.

He gulped. “I can explain.” Hsien Chern folded her hands on her lap and fixed a stare at him. Her eyes were dark, lips pressed together so hard, they were barely visible. This unnerved him, causing his mind to fumble and a farrago of words poured from his mouth. He tried explaining about his various names and their effect on his life but he could see she didn’t understand.

Hsien Chern’s lips reappeared as she sighed. “You’re Chinese, you should be proud of your Chinese name. Why do you want to be like an ang moh with an English name?”

The resignation in her voice pierced him. In all the time he’d known her, they rarely had a disagreement because he’d always given in, believing harmony far outweighed pushing his point. But this was different. They were talking about his name, something that defined him.

“Just because I have an English name doesn’t mean I’m aping Western values. I like to be known as Albert because it makes me comfortable.”

Hsien Chern made an irritated sound. “How can you deny your Chinese history? How you can deny your clan and your forefathers?”

Was she serious? He fought back a guffaw. “My clan? My forefathers? My great-grandfather was the only one in my family from China. Everyone else was born here. We’re all Singaporeans. I consider myself Singaporean, not Chinese. It’s like expecting an American to say, ‘I’m American of British heritage,’ or ‘I’m Australian of Scottish heritage.’ Do you think Americans go around saying I was born in L.A. but I’m actually British?” He scarcely believed he’d uttered those words. Perhaps it was his so-called Western name imbuing him with courage. He loved Hsien Chern, but he refused to be Tan Chin Han any longer.

When Hsien Chern rose from her seat, he wasn’t surprised. He knew crossing her this way tore at the foundation of their relationship. She arched her back gracefully, laid his grade A assignment on the table and walked away. His gaze lingered on the gossamer hair he’d ran his fingers through, and on the hips he’d rested his fingertips on. The impulse to beg for forgiveness overwhelmed him and it took a Herculean effort to restrain himself. That was the last time he spoke to Hsien Chern. He sometimes saw her in one of the campus canteens, or seated in the library but she never acknowledged his presence. He was disappointed she couldn’t accept that he was Albert Tan but he understood why she felt so strongly about Chinese names: she believed in the power of names too.

## VI. Balestierboy

Albert didn't date again while at university. Even after graduation, he eschewed the social scene. Then he found a place where he could be himself and yet remain anonymous: the World Wide Web.

This haven he discovered inside his computer. Seated in front of a yellowing keyboard and monitor and clad only in Bermudas and a ratty tee shirt, he could socialise in safety. He learnt early on not to reveal his real identity and discovered no one expected him to. Instead, he used handles. With his favourite name of Balestierboy, he ventured into IRC channels, newsgroups and forums, meeting Singaporeans of a different breed. These folk were more vocal with their opinions, never hesitating to voice dissenting views. There was man2man, who advocated five percent of all government officials should be gay; happy\_kitty\_398 who wanted the SPCA banned from putting down healthy cats and dogs; and oppositionmember who simply took the position opposite to whatever the government proposed. Blastierboy was happy to dwell among the virtual populace, strange as they were, because they were honest. The irony was he didn't know their real names. He'd never met any of them, heard any of their voices, nor seen a jpeg of any of them. That was how he liked it. He could trust them with his most intimate concerns, and they with theirs.

The more time he spent online, the more his popularity grew and with it, his confidence. With a buoyant new demeanor, he found himself capable of meeting people's glances. He participated in company functions, chaired sub-committee meetings and organised the company tennis tournament. He even

had a few dates. Not that he was looking for someone but spending face time with someone was a welcome change from eating chicken rice out of a Styrofoam box by the glow of the CRT monitor. He cruised along with this lifestyle for the better part of two years until he encountered Callmezoe.

They met as gamers in a mahjong room and started chatting. She enjoyed Sandra Bullock movies, music by Lisa Loeb, nasi lemak from the Adam Road hawker centre and taking the MRT from end to end to chill out—all activities he enjoyed too. He didn't trust that someone could dovetail with his quirks, likes and temperament, but found this to be true the more time he spent online with her. Not that they didn't have heated discussions when the endless clacking of his keyboard beat out a frenzied rhythm like raindrops on a zinc roof, but there was no argument they couldn't end amicably. She heightened his appreciation of the offline world. He became aware of little things: a changeable lizard scampering to the cover of bushes as he walked along the pavement; the deep pink of bougainvillea bracts covering the span of an overhead bridge; the gathering of condensation on an ice-cold glass of Coke. She made his dulled senses come alive and he was grateful. More than grateful, for he was certain the strange knots in his stomach were the first hints of love. She must've felt likewise for she offered to send a photo of herself. He balked at the thought. He wanted to see her picture, but at the same time he understood that doing so would alter their relationship. But if he declined her offer, it would be the snub that heralded the end of their friendship. Over the next few days, he stalled by not going online. When he couldn't keep away, he

logged on with another handle and sought advice. His friends' consensus was that meeting her IRL would ruin what he and Callmezoe shared. He agreed, fearing she would be disappointed with plain old Albert Tan Chin Han. He emailed her to explain all this. She reminded him that she was taking a chance too, that he might not like her. The thought of him rejecting her was ludicrous but he mulled it over and decided he had to match her display of courage. So he sent a request to meet. She acquiesced and they agreed on a time and place.

On the morning of their meeting, he awoke with pain twisting his guts. He lay curled like a prawn, fists balled into the pillows. He regretted agreeing to meet and wanted to call it off, then remembered she'd vowed not to be online that morning as a precaution against him chickening out. So he dressed and left the flat with a large golf umbrella even though the day was cloudless. On the train ride into town, he kneaded his knuckles till they were raw. At Bugis Junction, he emerged from the fluorescent glow of the train station into the searing light. There was a hoard of pedestrians milling about and he treaded his way to the fountain. Jets of water arced in the air, smashed into each other and scattered a shower of water in a neat circle that darkened the flagstones of the small plaza. Children were dashing in and out of the jets, their soaked clothes clinging to them. They shrieked endlessly, drawing smiles from the crowd ringing the fountain. He scanned the adults but couldn't spot her, and so began looking beyond the circle of spectators, at the people seated on the seats and benches. Beside an American couple dressed in the faded tees

and rumpled cut-offs of backpackers, sat a woman chewing on a fingernail. She sported a skirt with an ethnic print and a cropped cotton tee that showed off her midriff. Her hair was gathered into a sensible ponytail. But he barely registered all this. Instead, his eyes were fixed on the long golf umbrella propped up beside her. He inched over, holding out his own. His limping movements caught her attention, and he held his breath as her gaze slowly settled on him. She smiled, dimpling her cheeks.

“Hi.” Her voice was steady, without a hint of nervousness. “I’m Steph. But you can call me Zoe.”

He laughed, his voice bursting with anxious energy. He extended a hand. She gripped it firmly, pumping it up and down.

“I want to say nice to finally meet you but that’s not true. I’ve known you for half a year. You’re probably my best friend,” she said.

He grinned. “I can’t seem to let go of your hand.”

“That’s okay. I don’t want you to.” Her face flushed at her own words. They stood there with the sun beating down, whitewashing their features as the crowd swirled around them. Then he realised he’d forgotten to introduce himself.

“I’m Albert. Albert Tan Chin Han.”

“Well, Albert Albert Tan Chin Han, I think you have a lovely name.”

Ends

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