During the latter half of 2011, images of a middle-aged Asian man with glasses and grey hair, set against a monochrome green background, began circulating on social media, first in the US and then internationally. All the images appeared to be based on a similar template, each overlaid with blocky white uppercase text at the top and bottom of the image. Although the specific wording of the text changed from one iteration to another, it was obviously meant to be read as a statement from the Asian man in the image directed at a school-aged child. In every case, the captions seemed to set out extreme, unreasonable and often ridiculous expectations from the Asian father in relation to his child’s academic achievement, particularly with respect to test grades: ‘You win spelling bee? Why you no win spelling A?’ ‘You may only get D if it has M or Ph in front of it.’ ‘You Asian, not B Asian!’ ‘Facebook? Why don’t you face book and study?’ ‘To be or not to be? You get two B and you out of house.’ ‘Why you get F in gender?’ ‘You get B+ on blood test? Failure run through veins.’

The man became known among those participating in the creation, modification, and sharing of these images as ‘High Expectations Asian Dad,’ and despite their unapologetic trade in blunt stereotyping – or more likely because of it – he resonated among a certain subset of social media users, many of them undoubtedly of Asian heritage. Scores of disparate versions of the image appeared on blogs and user-generated platforms like 4chan, 9GAG, MemeBase, and Buzzfeed, as well as pop culture blogs like MTV’s Iggy and Pop Hangover. On Tumblr, it inspired an #asianfather hashtag. At the height of its popularity, near the end of 2011, it was well-known enough that remixers began combining High Expectations Asian Dad with other, similarly well-known image ‘macros’: LOLCats and advice animals, the Ancient Aliens guy, the Most Interesting Man in the World, Overly Attached Girlfriend, Bad Luck Brian, and a host of other stock character templates that have been circulating and morphing across the web for several years. By the time this particular version was fizzling out in mid-2012, a dedicated MemeGenerator page had received more than 28,308 submissions.

‘High Expectations Asian Dad’ is, of course, a meme – a term that at the moment seems to be laden with nearly as many meanings as there are versions of the slippery things to which it is supposed to refer. Memes, whatever they are, appear to have become a ubiquitous part of digital culture around the world, and in doing so they have inspired interest from an array of groups that usually seem to have precious few interests in common: teens, political strate-
gists, computer geeks, social media managers, activists of all stripes, market researchers, multinational brands, and, not least, intellectual property lawyers.

Only lately have scholars joined this motley assemblage, and even then taking tentative, halting steps, as if unsure whether this phenomenon occupies a space above or below internet porn on the spectrum of online spaces and practices worth studying.

Limor Shifman, a senior lecturer in the department of Communication and Journalism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has come down firmly on the side of those who believe not only that internet memes merit academic interest but that they are altering the nature of public discourse altogether. *Memes in Digital Culture* is a slim volume, just a tad over 200 pages, published as part of MIT Press’ Essential Knowledge series. With it, Shifman attempts to demystify for both scholars and laypersons the curious trifles of digital image and video (yes, there are video memes, too), which have infiltrated the online sphere to such an extent that, in her view, they epitomize the very essence of participatory culture and Web 2.0.

While it is fair to say that scholars have been slow to jump on meme culture as a research subject, it is not to say that they have ignored it altogether. Shifman does an admirable job of pulling together a significant portion of the existing scholarly literature to date (to 2012 or so, in any case, which, as she notes, is precious little) in her attempt to pin down these artefacts and explain what they tell us about digital culture. This includes tracing the origins of the term back to Richard Dawkins’ 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, in which the scientist coined the term meme as part of an effort to apply evolutionary theory to cultural change. Dawkins famously described memes as small cultural units of transmission, analogous to genes (with which the term is meant to rhyme: ‘meem’, not ‘me-me’) that spread from person to person in similar fashion to biological agents such as genetic material, by copying or imitation. While there are those who would like to call this a ‘viral’ process, which would seem to connect memes with that other ubiquitous buzzword of modern digital culture, Shifman takes a hard line here: despite Dawkins having biology in mind in 1976, she says it is both unnecessary and confusing to equate memes too literally with biological processes, as some in the parallel linguistic field of mimesis have attempted. Rather, she says, ‘the ideas of replication, adaptation, and fitness to a certain environment can be analyzed from a purely sociocultural perspective.’ (12)

It is here, too, that Shifman veers away from the notion that memes, like genes or an infectious agent, can be understood as discrete units. Instead, she says, the actual character and significance of internet memes can be grasped only by conceiving of them as *groups* of digital items sharing common