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A Talk with My Name

By Zhen Wu

My name and I sit down at the table. I pour a cup of tea for her, and we stare at each other. This is my first talk with my name, and I barely know her, though we have known each other for eighteen years. More than that, I even have had tension with her during the past fifteen years of my school life. My name contains a special character, “禎,” which is part of the reign title of an emperor of the Ming Dynasty. However, Chinese people around me usually write it wrong as another word, “楨,” which only means “hardwood.” I was stubborn when I was little, so I repeated telling them what the character should be. Thinking back, that stubbornness may be generated just because I am a Virgo. As I grow up, I have gradually cared less about if people write my name right: speaking my name correctly is enough. Recently, my dad sent me pictures that people wrote my name wrong and said: “Your attitudes need to change, and names are worth being respected. Try to talk with your name and figure out the question: what do our names stand for in the world?” So that is why I take my name out for a cup of tea.

In the steam of the hot tea, I carefully start first, “Why did mom and dad give the first part of you to me?”

My name clears her throat and starts talking about the meaning of my first name. “My first part means luck and blessings in Chinese. Your family gave it to you in the hope of having the good fortune to realize your dreams and being lucky throughout your lifetime. I think that is what people believe: names can reflect people’s lives. Chinese people assure that good luck hides in people’s names, which is the charm of names.”

When my name describes these, I recall when every time my family members call my name and I reply to them, it is a sweet call and response. I understand better why my dad used to say that I needed to cherish my name. The love and hope that my parents give me within it are irreplaceable. Writing my name costs just a few seconds, but the love in it will accompany me throughout my lifetime.

After sharing the meaning of my first name, my name tells me an interesting tradition in some Chinese' first names, especially popular in the past eras. In some families, people usually have two words in their first names. However, the first word doesn't have a meaning; it represents the person's position in the family clan. The word can be either the same word for all family members or chosen in the order of ages of siblings. "When people see these similar names, it is easier to know that these people belong to the same family. In other words, names become the external appearance of people's blood ties," my name says, sipping tea.

Up till now, I have made the first step in finding the key to the question. Names contain hope and love from families and work as sweet bonds to connect families tightly and warmly.

"We have talked about my first part, then what do you think about my last part, your surname 'Wu?'" my name asks with interest.

I get confused, "Many Chinese people have the same surnames though they are not from the same family, so surnames do not represent something."

My name shakes her head and smiles secretly, "Watch this video and rethink about your last name." In the video, I discover the long-lasting history of my surname, "Wu," and feel a sense of pride by knowing these ("Wu (surname)," 00:00:00-00:07:31). My surname "Wu" is the tenth most common surname in China. It generated from ancient surnames called "Ji" and

“Zhou” during the Zhou Dynasty in the 13th century B.C. The state where it originated is now the province of Jiangsu, which is in the north of my hometown. Later, the state of Wu became one of the most powerful countries in China during the Spring and Autumn Period.

“I also heard that because ‘Ji’ was the surname of the emperor of Zhou, there is a saying among people that ‘Wu’ means ‘Gateway to Heaven,’” my name says proudly.

Reading through the history of my surname, I felt connected with people who have the same surname with me throughout history: the same surname, the same identification. In the flowing river of history, we are all small branches of the big family tree of “Wu.” My last name gives me a “root tag” and acts as a bridge that connects the history and present. It reminds me of where I come from, that is, where is my root. The long-lasting history makes it culturally rich. It is far more than a simple word as I thought before.

After introducing the roots of my last name, my name looks up and asks, “Now that you have been in America for half of a year, do you have any thoughts about what we names represent in the whole world where so many cultures meet with each other?”

I make a try after brief thinking, “So names represent our cultural background?”

She nods her head and starts talking. Names can be symbols of a culture. Behind names are the infinite cultural treasures that are worth being known and learned. “Do you know Confucius?” she asks.

I’m very excited when she mentions the name. Since I was little, I started to learn “The Analects of Confucius” in school, so Confucius is the appearance of an important part of Chinese culture in my heart.

“Right. Confucius has become the representative of the ‘Ru’ culture of China. We call it

‘Ru’ because ‘Ru’ means elegance in Chinese, corresponding with the self-cultivation that the culture advocates. However, in English, it is directly translated as ‘Confucian culture.’ The name has now been a ‘cultural tag’ of Chinese culture. As you can see, Confucius Institutes are spread to the whole world and work as places where cultures merge. People from all over the world go to the institutes to learn about Confucius and to have a taste of the culture that Confucius stands for. When people mention the name ‘Confucius’ as I did just now, we tend to connect the Confucian culture, which is an essential part of Chinese culture behind the name. In the world, names work as telescopes through which people can see the countries’ cultures.”

When I introduce Chinese culture to foreign friends, I recognize that I am a small ambassador of Chinese culture. By teaching people my name, I am also conveying the Chinese culture behind my name. When it comes to what names represent in the world, I would like to regard names as spiritual ambassadors of cultures that spread the home countries’ cultures and promote to merge different cultures.

“I think you have already had an overall thought about your dad’s question. Let us read this sentence.” My name shows me a sentence from the article, “Names That Are Unfamiliar to You Aren’t ‘Hard,’ They’re ‘Unpracticed’” written by N’Jameh Camara, a Gambian artist growing up in America. “You see here, ‘[...] communicates clearly that “white names” are easier and more desirable than names which stretch our understanding of who we — as a cast, an office, a neighborhood, a nation — are’ (para 7). I am so special, but why you gave yourself an English name ‘Angela’ to replace me when you came to America? Do you think this approaches white supremacy as Camara implies?”

I think about the past six months and begin telling her the story. “Camara shows her

personalities in this sentence. She insists on her original name because she recognizes her culture behind her name as treasures, and she wants to be the special one. For me, when I first came to America six months ago, foreign students and staff around me had trouble pronouncing you correctly. I had an experience when I went to the school hospital; I did not realize the nurses were calling me for a long time. You made it very inconvenient for communication with others. Now that the cultural environment is different, and from a student's perspective, why not give myself a name that is more convenient to show the similarity instead of insisting on my personality? Actually, adopting a convenient name also proves what you said about names and cultures. After naming myself 'Angela,' it has helped me fit in the cultural environment better and made communications easier."

My name listens, as if deep in thought. "I have seen your attitudes toward me from stubborn, to 'I do not care,' and gladly, now you are thinking about me. What about your dad's question, what do our names stand for in the world?"

I sip tea and answer proudly with a big smile, "Names are sweet bonds among families, tell the roots of where we come from and are cultural ambassadors that merge different cultures in the world."

We propose a toast for the understanding between both of us: I have deeper thinking about my name, and my name knows the reason that I made an English name. It is worth sitting down and have an in-depth talk with our names and find the answers to the question ourselves. Thanks, my name.

Works Cited

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