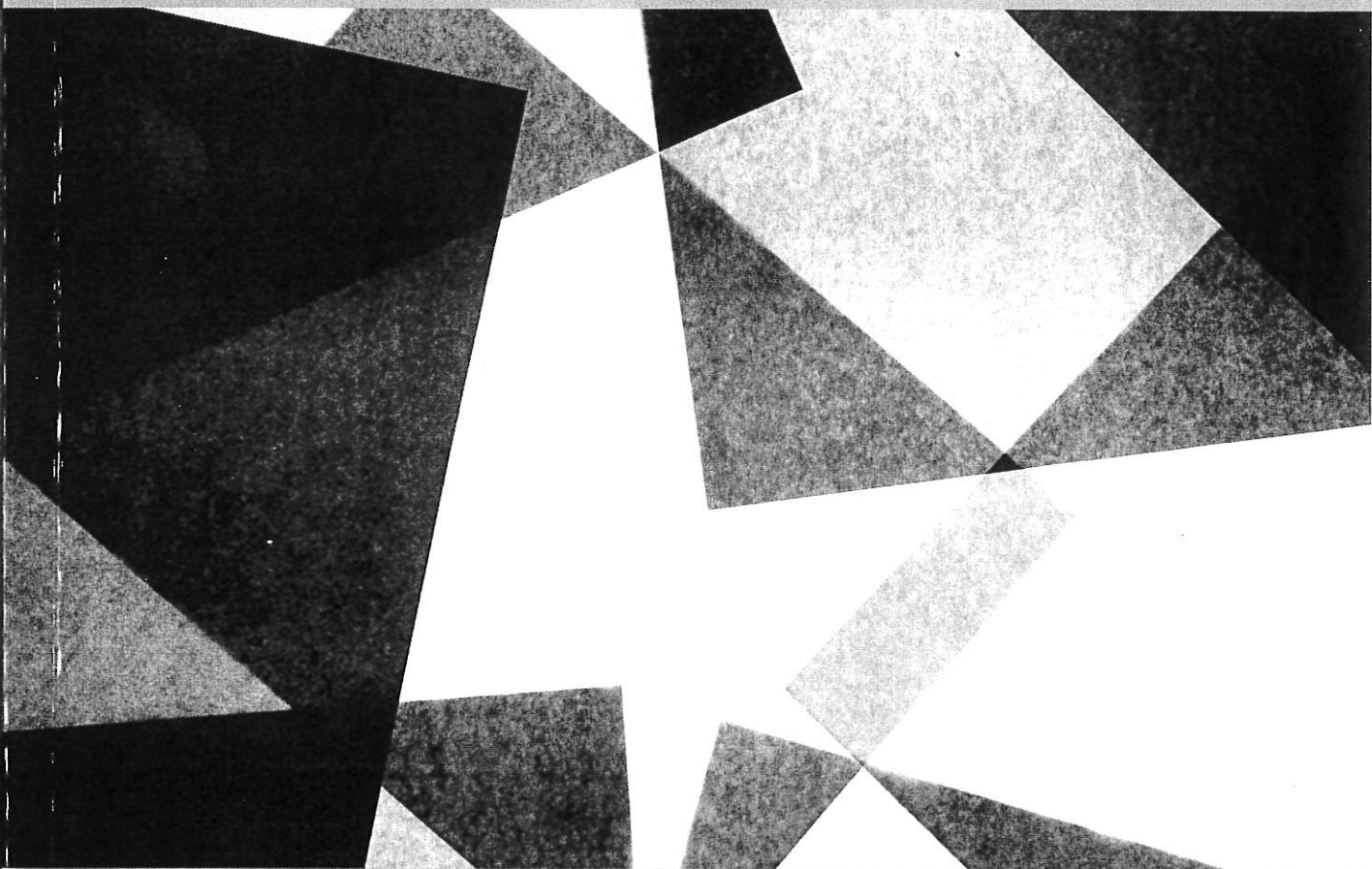


OUR

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CHAPTER I

“What’s in a Name?”

Shifting Meanings, Negotiating Identities, and Globalizing Relationships

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What’s in a name? When people travel to different cultural contexts, what happens to their names? To what extent can people’s names be translated across cultural borders? In an age of increasing globalization, how do sojourners, refugees, migrants, and immigrants negotiate multiple, if not competing, naming practices? As an illustration, when a Mandarin speaker moves to the United States, she more likely prefers, in consideration of the U.S. hosts, to be called Linda, Jennifer, or Stephanie. In contrast, when an English speaker moves to Taiwan or China, he is most probably still John, or 約翰 in Mandarin (unless he speaks Mandarin and chooses to adopt a Chinese name). In this essay, I argue that names reflect interpersonal choices that are enabled and constrained by larger sociocultural norms, geopolitical relations, and global conditions. That is, names are both individual and cultural and both personal and political. I will examine the contested nature of names through my lived negotiations with both my name(s) and naming a child in an intercultural and international marriage. Negotiation is fundamentally a dynamic communication process that involves the give and take as relational partners enact, perform, and manage their sense of self, relationships, and worldview (Hecht et al., 2005; Jackson II, 1999; Ting-Toomey, 2005).

The birth of my son has intensified my awareness of one’s given name as a sign, symbol, and signifier of a person’s self, personhood, and cultural identity. Further, being in an intercultural and international marriage has complicated the negotiations that are required to name a child born outside both my husband’s and my country of birth and citizenship. Mirroring the languages spoken inside our house (namely, English, Chinese, Taiwanese, and Japanese), we want our son to embrace his multiple cultural influences as an Asian (and/or Taiwanese and Japanese) American. At the same time, my husband and I are very aware that our son has a different relationship to the United States than we do. Legally, he is decidedly a U.S. citizen and already has more rights than his parents, who are petitioning to become permanent residents in the United States. Racially, he will have the experience of being a minority in the United States, a status that his parents did not grow up with. Naming him in negotiation with my husband has compelled me to reexamine my relationship with my own name(s) and also to reconsider all that goes into a name, such as context, meaning, affiliation, or identification, and so on. For instance, Edwards and Caballero (2008) synthesize naming research and indicate mixed findings regarding the extent to which distinctively racialized personal names (for example, DeShawn would be

perceived as African American) are associated with social costs, social benefits, and life outcomes for cocultural members, such as lower expectations from teachers and racial solidarity. The researchers also conclude that a fuller understanding of naming practices requires addressing the *processes* of how “mixed” parents choose their children’s names.

In the following, I first reflect on the processes of how I have negotiated my name(s) as I (re)locate myself in the U.S. context with its particular cultural, racial, and ethnic tapestries. Then I reflect on the processes of how my husband and I as an intercultural and international couple have negotiated the naming of our son. I conclude by describing the intersection of name, voice, and identity negotiation situated in intercultural relationships in the context of globalization.

Critical Moments of Disorientation

“What is your Chinese name?” asked many of my colleagues, friends, and professors during my first semester at the University of North Texas, which also happened to be my first trip to the United States. When I stopped introducing myself with an English name, I no longer had to respond to the question. However, the struggle has not stopped over communicating my name to non-Mandarin speakers as long as I continue to reside in the United States (Lee, 1998). The negotiations that I went through have profoundly shaped how I come to experience my sense of self in the U.S. context. Today I have grown very comfortable with the various iterations (such as different tone combinations) of how my name might be pronounced by my colleagues and students in the United States. My journey of becoming and later unbecoming “Rita” reflects how names are used to negotiate the boundaries, as well as the politics, of belonging and not belonging across contexts in an age of increasing globalization. In the process, I became conscious of how our names hail, address, produce, call attention to, and *interpellate* us into being, or existence, in social interactions that adhere to the dominant ideologies of a society (Althusser, 1971). In other words, interpellation can be understood as a social process in which an individual encounters a culture’s normative attitudes, values, and beliefs and internalizes them.

I was born and raised in a small town in northwestern Taiwan. I first became “Rita” when I entered college as an English major and moved to the largest metropolitan city in Taiwan, Taipei. I attended the most prestigious teacher education institution in Taiwan where I was trained to become an English language teacher in secondary schools. At the new-student orientation in the summer of 1996, I was instructed to select an English name for class interactions within my major. The explanation was that it would be odd, awkward, and disruptive to use Chinese names when speaking in English. I can still recall sitting in my dorm room that night and going through a book on popular English names and picked “Rita” because it was short and sounded sharp to my ears. Over the course of the next eight years I was “Rita” in interactions with my fellow English majors, professors, and later students. To be repeatedly *hailed* as “Rita” affected me deeply throughout my college years. First, I was only “Rita” in classrooms and on the essays that I submitted in the courses in my major. Then, I became “Rita” outside the classrooms and in nonacademic interactions as well. Gradually, “Rita” did not just mark me as an English major in college but also became my voluntary identity, and this is who I was to my friends whom I called Sherry, Vivian, Patrick, and so forth in return. As the name “Rita” permeated and became enmeshed in my social worlds, I was to some degree unbecoming “雅雯 (Yea-Wen)” in college. I did not question this social practice at the time because I enjoyed the spaces and opportunities that the act of renaming myself as “Rita” created for relating to myself and others differently. The only times I felt tensions because of my new name and identity were during trips home to visit my parents, grandparents, siblings, and other families. The unquestioned mandate of using English names during teacher education symbolizes the disconnection between language education and intercultural pedagogy. Kelly (2012) concludes that only a minority of countries “include aspects of intercultural or sociocultural pedagogy in the training of [language] teachers” (p. 410).

I became Rita in college, but I was, am, and will always be 雅雯 at home. As a first-generation college student, my self-selected English name symbolized

increasingly intensified and heightened disconnections for me at home. Inside and outside the college classroom, I was learning more than just how to effectively teach English as a foreign language. Just as symbolic as becoming Rita, I was also acquiring Western cultural ideas, values, and practices in the process (such as women's rights, individualism, and cosmopolitanism). For example, in my English composition classes, I had to learn how to write "logically" like a native English speaker with clear topics and supporting sentences and such. In my communication sequence courses that covered pronunciation, conversation, speech, and debate, I had to learn to speak, argue, and reason like native English speakers. Unintentionally, the training communicated a false need to unlearn the familiar, yet "unsophisticated," ways of thinking, writing, and speaking with which I was raised. Yet, the curriculum treated English language acquisition instrumentally and practically, and thus did not include any space for cultural conversations of what it might mean to become an English teacher in Taiwanese society. For example, the curriculum encouraged the burgeoning teacher to accept discourses in English as the default international lingua franca, which gives unquestioned power and status to the English language in everyday lives, even in a non-English-speaking country like Taiwan.

Since my undergraduate education mandated adopting an English name, I grew accustomed to introducing both my Mandarin and English names in the context of teaching English in Taiwan. To be a legitimate English teacher, I thought I ought to have an English name, even though it would not appear in any official documents or any forms of identification. I was both Rita and 雅雯 to my students, most of whom—though this was not required—also adopted English names. Throughout the four years teaching English in Taiwan, I lived in constant fear of slowly losing my English proficiency over time. In fact, my worst nightmare was to find myself unable to carry on a meaningful conversation with a native English speaker in the presence of my students. So, I sought out and worked on maintaining close relationships with native English speakers in my social networks. To most of them, I was just Rita, and,

unless they asked, I did not volunteer my Chinese name. In a metropolitan city like Taipei, it is a common practice for individuals to adopt English names, particularly for work-related purposes (e.g., having to interact with English-speaking clients).

In the U.S. context, with its particular configuration of race and intergroup relations, my strategy of introducing myself as both Yea-Wen and Rita took on different meanings. After one or two semesters at a U.S. university, I renegotiated gradually unbecoming Rita and transitioning to Yea-Wen. Initially, I thought nothing of it and whenever asked to introduce myself I responded: "My Chinese name is Yea-Wen Chen, and you can also call me Rita." I genuinely considered Rita an easier alternative for others. Many of my English-speaking friends in Taiwan were very comfortable calling me Rita, so I did not expect otherwise until I was asked: "What is your Chinese name?" I also realized that most of my professors and colleagues, even when provided an alternative, made conscious efforts to address me as Yea-Wen. One woman even confronted a man for insisting on calling me Rita, which genuinely touched me. Being hailed, called, and addressed as Yea-Wen by both U.S. American and international colleagues affected my identity in at least three ways. It recognized the cultural integrity of my upbringing in Taiwan; it affirmed my identity position as a cultural other in the United States; and it incorporated me into U.S. race relations and racialized me as Asian. Such hailing did not just nudge me to take seriously my Taiwanese cultural grounding; it also raised my consciousness about my particularized positionality as a sojourning Asian woman.

In reflection, the journey of becoming and unbecoming Rita while unbecoming and becoming Yea-Wen came full circle in teaching me about the intersection of name, culture, identity, and communication. Names are not solely personal; they are cultural, social, and political. Names are simultaneously stable and fluid, individual and cultural, and negotiated and contested. Further, when we cross cultural borders, how we experience our names and identities is open to challenges and potential shifts as we situate ourselves in different contexts, relationships, and group dynamics.

Naming Practices and Romanizing Systems in Taiwan

I chose Yea-Wen as the Romanization of 雅雯. Yet I experience 雅雯 and Yea-Wen differently. Two prevalent practices structure, shape, and affect how I have experienced my name(s), 雅雯 and/or Yea-Wen: (1) fortune telling, or *xianming*, in determining prosperous, auspicious, and good names for newborns; and (2) competing systems of Romanizing Chinese in Taiwan. In the process of moving from Taiwan to the United States, my names reflect the political nature of competing Romanizing systems in Taiwan rather than the fortune-telling praxis. Most of my friends, colleagues, and students in the United States do not know that my parents named me utilizing the service of a fortune teller, and many of them struggle initially to pronounce Y(e)a-Wen.

The prevalence of using the services of fortune tellers as a naming practice in Taiwan deeply affected how I related to my name growing up. Chuang (2011) argues that fortune telling (*xianming*) and divination (*zhan bu*) are deeply embedded in Chinese social life and reflects Chinese cultural praxis and values. As a naming practice, fortune telling in Taiwan and in Chinese culture functions to foretell a person's *ming* (fate), which is believed to be predetermined by the divine's will. The fortune teller's role is to interpret the divine's will as indicated by a child's time and date of birth. As a cultural praxis, fortune telling functions to make positive predictions, reduce the uncertainty of one's future, and create a sense of psychological security (Chuang, 2011). Like many in Taiwan, my parents sought the recommendations of a fortune teller to identify a good name for me. The fortune teller suggested several names in accordance with my birth and gender. For example, Zou (2008) describes that Chinese male names express strength, bravery, nobility, long life, good fortune, and so forth; whereas Chinese female names tend to connote beauty, grace, charm, virtuousness, and so on. Taking into account pronunciation, connotation, and number of strokes, my parents picked 雅雯, which literally means "elegant coloring of cloud patterns," connotes elegance, propriety, and grace, and contains twenty-four stroke counts in total. Coincidentally, many other parents share my parents'

excitement for this name, which has been on the list of the most common given names for a number of years. Growing up, I often struggled with sharing the same given name with others, including a former student.

After I relocated to the United States, I started identifying myself as Yea-Wen, and I no longer shared the same given name with anyone in my social world. Unlike one of the 雅雯, I now stand out as Yea-Wen. There are at least 100 different schemes, or systems, of converting non-Roman words, characters, and scripts into Latin alphabetic scripts (aka Romanization) (Wang, 2004). Internationally, *Hanyu pinyin fang'an*, the official scheme for Romanizing Chinese characters in the People's Republic of China (PRC), has been adopted as the international standard. Due to political tensions and sovereign disputes, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan announced *Zhuyin dier shi* as its official standard of transliteration in 1986, but multiple standards of Romanization remain in use in Taiwanese society (Wang, 2004). Wang (2004) argues that the competing Romanization systems in Taiwan reflect national anxieties, ambivalences, and discontents. I chose to Romanize my name using the *Gwoyue Romanization* system. Instead of Ya-Wen, I spell my name Yea-Wen, which is sometimes mispronounced as "Ye-Wen." I am often reminded of this political issue as I negotiate how "Yea-Wen" is pronounced, and I become increasingly conscious of how names are political artifacts that reflect social practices we take for granted.

Naming a Culturally "Mixed" Child

At the center where my husband and I took childbirth classes, I came across an article on factors to consider when deciding a baby's name, which was featured in a popular parenting magazine (Peachman, 2014). Using previous research, the author advances three recommendations before deciding on a name: (1) look up the meaning(s) of a name to avoid negative connotations; (2) consider the impact that a name might make on its own; and (3) choose the spelling carefully. For parents from any historically marginalized groups and/or from outside the United States, these three tactics alone do not come close to capturing the complexity

of possible considerations. In naming a culturally "mixed" child, my husband and I considered a range of factors beyond meaning and spelling.

As sojourners and new immigrant parents in the United States, my husband and I were acutely aware that choosing a name can reflect degrees of acculturation to the host society or degrees of ethnic identification (Gerhards & Hans, 2009). In discussing our son's name, a friend, who researches race and ethnic politics, commented that all her life she had to negotiate her name. Such negotiations informed and gave meaning to her identity, which later became her academic work. As a critical intercultural communication scholar, I am all for names that symbolize and signify my child's diverse cultural backgrounds and complex cultural identifications. At the same time, I am also a partner in an international and intercultural marriage. For me, that means naming has to be equitably negotiated between my husband and I, as well as our respective families. It would be problematic to give our son a Japanese name that I found linguistically challenging to pronounce, as it would be for my husband to pronounce certain Chinese names.

In naming our son, my husband and I considered various ways of balancing all three of our cultural contexts (namely, Japanese, Taiwanese, and U.S. cultures) and the dynamic geopolitical, historical, and race relations among and across them. Ultimately, we desired a name that made sense for Chinese, Japanese, and English speakers to pronounce, that carried the same meaning across the three cultural contexts, and that reflected our cultural praxis and values. After months of deliberations, we agreed on a two-syllable name that all of our immediate family members find easy to pronounce. We also came up with a middle name that is a partial hybrid of both my husband and my given names. As my husband and I have learned to situate ourselves as racialized Asians within the U.S. context (for example, we are implicated within the model minority stereotype, the history of Japanese internment during World War II, and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882), we know that we will need to prepare Leo to learn to locate, navigate, and find his own voice and identity at the intersection of hybrid culture, nationality, and gender.

Conclusion

So, what's in a name? How do we address one another without names? Names can convey so many complex things and reflect so many complicated issues that we take for granted. At one level, our given names signify the profound bonds that we share with our parents or the people who raise us in culturally meaningful ways. At another level, our names hail us and help construct our identities that represent and reinforce our positions in society. At the same time, the meaningfulness of names is negotiated and constituted in relationships with others within particular contexts. The lens of negotiation centralizes the roles that each of us play in the process of giving meaning to names; on the other hand, the lens of interpellation underscores the "normalized" social practices, forces, and ideologies that enable and/or constrain the bargaining between relational actors.

In an age of increasing globalization, people are moving between and across cultural borders at an accelerated rate more than ever before. When people move and find themselves in new cultural contexts, so do their names. Names are both personal and political; they signify identity and relationship negotiations; and they have important implications for how one acts, speaks, and enacts oneself in the world. Cultural and global citizens of today and tomorrow will need to develop sensitivity to understand names as cultural phenomena that carry both stable and fluid meanings.

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