

“How An Ethnic Name Can Be A Cultural Stand”

What’s in a name? More than you think. Read Eng C.’s take on ethnic names.

BY [ENG C.](#) ● [OUR STORIES](#) ● APRIL 4, 2019



“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose

By any other name would smell as sweet.” (Shakespeare)

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What’s in a name, or an ethnic one to be precise?

The majority of people I know, even my immigrant parents, have English names that are easy to pronounce. Yet somehow, my parents chose to give me a very Chinese name. When asked why I’m the only one in my family with a very Chinese name, my usual response is a joke that being the youngest child, my parents just got lazy. Living in an immigrant country such as Canada we are lucky to experience cultural acceptance unmatched anywhere in the world. Yet, for those who are minorities, whether it be religion, skin color, language, or even (you may be surprised) an ethnic name, there are still struggles that abound on a daily basis. A name is an expression of who we are, who we identify as an ethnic name can be a cultural stand and an important part of how we define ourselves.

Should we change our ethnic name? This personal question often means choosing between personal growth vs. societal growth. It often means choosing a life that may be easier vs. a more challenging one that will change societal perceptions slowly over time.

Let me introduce myself. My name is Enging, which is the English spelling of my Chinese name. I was born and raised in Canada, to immigrant parents from China. All my life people have been mispronouncing my name. They usually pronounce it Enging with a soft “g” like engine, something I never fully understood. Every so often, a random stranger at a store or restaurant tries to read my name, and surprisingly gets it right. This always puts a surprised smile on my face. Most often, it’s incorrect and I don’t bother to correct it, because I’ve just gotten used to the mispronounced version of my name to the point that recently someone ELSE corrected it when I was introduced to a new friend and I hadn’t even realized it was misstated. Throughout the years, it just got tiring of making correction after correction. Sometimes I put restaurant reservations in my husband’s name because it’s just easier and faster and I don’t have to spell it out, similar to how I read about others with a similar problem [using their middle name to speed up the process.](#)

In university, a close friend of mine who was originally from China said to me, you should go by Amy because it's similar and easy to pronounce. I never told him my struggles but he must have known, as he too had probably experienced the same in the past when he first immigrated to Canada. I thought about it for a moment. He was just trying to help me, but it just felt wrong. First of all, my parents gave me my name, and because of that it's special. Second, I don't feel like an Amy, despite it being a pretty name; I feel like myself. My name is an extension of who I am and the two reasons above reflect who I am in its completeness: my family, and my individual self.

I am now in my thirties. I survived [growing up in the rural Canadian Prairies](#) being the only Asian in school with a name no one had ever heard of before; I survived being mistaken for an international student in University who was “fresh off the boat” or so I was told, and caused people to be shocked when they heard my perfect English. I also survived the stereotypes that you can't get a job with an ethnic name because once an employer sees your name on a resume that isn't something common like John or Elizabeth, they will toss it aside. Maybe that is true, and how many times this happened, well, I'll never know. Despite these setbacks and challenges, I never did change my name.

In 2017, the topic of Asian ethnic names in North America received widespread attention, unfortunately through a very negative situation that arose on an American university campus where people of East Asian ethnic names, mainly Chinese, (regardless of whether they were Americans or international students) were vandalized. A [subsequent viral Facebook video](#) emerged with several students explaining their Chinese names and expressing their pride in their name's meaning, a reflection of their identity and culture. They were discriminated against because of their ethnic names.

In the hit American show “How I Met Your Mother”, there is an episode from only a few years ago that shows the main character who is a university professor taking roll call for his class, and upon seeing a name that sounds like Cook Poo, he immediately assumes it's a joke name. Turns out it's an embarrassed Asian girl, who appears throughout the show each time the main characters make fun of her name (which many commenters on YouTube assumed is an ethnic Vietnamese name). I have always enjoyed this show, but this episode really showed what's still wrong with today's society when it comes to cultural tolerance and ethnic names.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lW_30vAJ_q8

If we continue to change our ethnic names how will we make change in today's global world and especially, in this multicultural country we call home? Long ago, in my parents' generation and prior to that, new Asian immigrants were the target of severe racism; adopting a western name was a way to survive. But now, the Canada we live in is more multicultural. How can we say we accept different religions, cultures, languages and skin colors and yet, we cannot accept different names? While it may seem trivial to some, an ethnic name is also a cultural stand. We don't all have to be Johns and Elizabeths to make it in Canada or anywhere else.

If you have an ethnic name like I do, I hope you will stick with it and continue to push for change. Or, perhaps you know someone in your life with an ethnic name. Maybe you never thought about the struggles they go through each day, the quiet stand they are making each time they introduce themselves. Think about what they've accomplished and perhaps you will see these friends and family members with a new set of eyes.