

FEATURE

My Chinese Name

by Frank Wu

When I was a kid growing up, I wished I were named Smith instead of Wu. I wished I were named Smith, because I believed that if that were the case then I would not face teasing and taunting, the childhood cruelties of the playground. Of course, I had an “American” first name. My parents, immigrants from China, had given me that name, but they used another name at home. They made the distinction between public and private, because they understood how important it was to assimilate. Other Asian American children were assigned a name by a teacher who likely believed herself to be doing the kid a favor. Or they announced to their elders that they were choosing their own nickname in an act of American rebellion.

Somehow, none of these adjustments were enough. Nor was my ability to speak English without an accent, to know the popular baseball players for the hometown Tigers, and to wear the same brand of blue jeans after annoying my parents to spend more money than our family could afford. No matter how “American” my brothers and I tried to become, we were perpetual

foreigners or curiosities. Ironically, the more we tried, the more pathetic we seemed. At least I didn’t perm my hair or have eyelid surgery.

That’s what I thought of when I heard Texas legislator Betty Brown’s recent comments to an Asian American advocate who appeared before her. She suggested in an offhand manner that Chinese people change their names to American names.

Then I watched a video clip of the entire exchange. It was worse than that. She also grilled the individual, who was testifying about a proposed voter identification regulation, about how the Chinese conducted elections as if he were a representative of a foreign nation by virtue of how he looked. (He held up well, despite apparently being native-born, meaning native-born to the United States, displaying both knowledge and patience as he explained different methods of transliteration. Imagine the confusion for everyone at the polls if Representative Brown’s idea was adopted, as people with “difficult” names also suddenly acquired multiple names.)

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The government official, who after all might represent a few Asian American constituents, makes a clear distinction between the Chinese with the “difficult” names on the one hand and Americans on the other hand. By doing so, she implies that Asians cannot be Americans. What is most astonishing is her denial afterward, seemingly sincere, that the matter has anything to do with race. She is referring to one group in particular; she is not attacking “difficult” names in general. It would be little better if she added a list of other types of names she found troublesome. Presumably she meant that she lacked invidious intent.

Little would be gained by accusing Representative Brown of racism. Her prejudices are not the point. The more important challenge is to explain to openminded people, especially leaders, what are the effects, intended or not, of their verbal conduct.

A glance at the internet shows that Representative Brown gave license to many more who are not hesitant about their racial impulses. They would like to send a message that is not subtle at all, giving an order from a social superior to a subordinate, signaling that what is most important is not whether a newcomer adapts and adjusts but whether she knows her place. It’s apparent that this issue is about much more than individual attitudes, hurt feelings, or even abstract principles.

Many immigrants, and the ancestors of many Americans who don’t doubt their identity as patriots, in fact changed their names. Only a few generations ago, many members of various ethnic groups identified themselves by a “nationality” and had not become “white” in the modern sense. As a condition of entry, no different than an inspection for disease or parasites, they were transformed whether they were willing. Yet for Asian immigrants, and even their descendents, it turns out to be “difficult” to disguise one’s identity. Perhaps it is “difficult” because of the consequences of comments such as Representative Brown’s – about how

“difficult” it is for other Americans to deal with us much less accept us as equals who belong. We are told we all look alike, and in an earlier era every immigrant became “John Chinaman.” When Europeans entered or waited at Ellis Island on the East Coast, Asians were turned away or imprisoned at Angel Island on the West Coast.

The greatest aspect of the dream that attracted so many of us, whatever our ancestry, to this great nation is the belief that anyone, whatever our names, can become an American if they believe in our shared principles of democracy.

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Posted by Frank Wu at April 10, 2009 05:35 PM