

What's Vietnamese for "Conflict?" An Exploration of Asian Identity Development Through a Vietnamese American/Canadian Perspective on Self-Given Names

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The Fall of Saigon in 1975 ended the Vietnam War and prompted the first large-scale wave of immigration from Vietnam to North America. This is where a new generation was born—a generation that would attempt to combine a deep history of Vietnamese culture and tradition with a new national identity.

Thirty years later, many Vietnamese families still face conflict on a daily basis in trying to reconcile two different cultures when asked a question as simple as, "What's your name?" This moral conversation will explore Kim's 1981 model of Asian American Identity Development through the personal narratives of a Vietnamese American and a Vietnamese Canadian as they dissect the constant struggle between the dual identities present in their names.

In Vietnamese tradition, the greater the number of syllables in your given name, the more complexity is invited into your life. Thus, to encourage simplicity, most Vietnamese names are gender neutral and monosyllabic. A simple name means a simple life, but for the two of us, a Vietnamese American and a Vietnamese Canadian, complexity has been invited into our lives not just by the names our parents chose, but through the names we have chosen for ourselves. These multiple self-given names il-

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lustrate our complex journey in developing our sense of ethnicity, race, and nationality. What exactly is in a name? One of the greatest writers in English history wrote: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet” (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II, ii, 46-47). If somebody calls us by a different name, does that change who we are inside? Names can evoke feelings of pride, strength, joy, sorrow, and history, but they can also be a source of ridicule, exclusion, and discrimination. More importantly, names are the gateway that exposes one’s identity to the world.

What Does a Name Have to do with Identity Development?

A simple demonstration of this conflict is in name structure. In the Western world, one’s first name takes primacy. Hưng or Châu, Henry or Patricia; whether we use our Vietnamese or English names, our given names come first. In Vietnamese culture, however, the sur name comes first, emphasizing that “filial piety is one of the most important ethics in the Vietnamese culture” (Nguyen, Messe, & Stollak, 1999, p. 10). Duty to the family lineage often takes precedence over personal concerns, and thus, we would be Mai Quang Hưng Henry and Nguyen Hoai Linh Châu Patricia. This simple observation in name structure illustrates the struggle between value systems and the conflict between the Western sense of individualism and the Eastern sense of family. Every time we are asked what our names are, we are forced to make a decision about who we place first.

The Meeting of the Moral Conversationalists

Hopeful for Family in Burlington (Châu/Patricia)

I met Hưng at an interview weekend for my graduate program. Before his arrival, I took a peek at the interview schedule and was intrigued by a name: “Mai, Hưng.” Being the only Vietnamese person in the cohort, I was ecstatic to see another person I could possibly relate to on a level beyond racial identity, but also on an ethnic and nationality level. I remember thinking, “Family is coming to town!” There was a slight possibility for someone to join the program that would whole-heartedly understand me, and possibly share a chuckle with me if I said, “*Muon đi an pho không?*” on a rainy day. I was so excited for the possibility of an *anh* or *chi* or *em* (names are gender neutral so I could not tell), a possible relative by shared heritage, coming to Burlington.

The interview weekend came, and I was standing in Ben & Jerry’s ice cream shop with a scoop of Cherry Garcia. I looked around the room, honing in on nametags, and caught the name “Mai” out of the corner of my eye. I ran up to the candidate and said, “You must be Hưng! My name is Trish! I’m so excited to see you!” I nearly dropped my scoop of ice cream trying to beam internal thoughts telepathically of “Omigosh! You’re Vietnamese! I’m Vietnamese! There will be more than one

Vietnamese person in the program! It's going to be so great!" and shaking his hand with the utmost appreciation of his presence. I was received with a firm handshake and a stern reply, "Hi. My name is Henry." My heart sunk. I had such hopes, and assumptions, of finding a peer that shared my same passion for Vietnamese identity. His reply, his English name, indicated to me that he wanted no part in his heritage.

Henry. With a one word reply, my heart sunk. I felt a yearning for some sort of external tie to my Vietnamese ethnicity and nationality. I wanted to have someone to share and possibly validate the ideas in my head about myself as a Vietnamese woman.

Historically, the Vietnamese shared a strong national identity that enabled them to oust the Chinese after a thousand years of occupation...The fierce independence as a people that has characterized Vietnam's history is to some extent a cultural norm of behaviour. (Walker-Moffatt, 1995, p.44)

Where was this strong national identity in the name Henry? This "fierce independence" of the Vietnamese culture and people is a value I own with pride. The royal English name demonstrated the opposite for me: shame. I know I had no grounds in judging Henry in this way, but I could not help but feel angry and wonder, "Why did you, Henry, change your name?"

Just Another Name (Huong/Henry)

I remember the anxiety of wondering if I would get called for an interview. I remember riding on the Greyhound through the dark and the cold wind that howled outside of the bus terminal at 2 A.M. as I waited for my interview host to pick me up. I remember seeing a certain name in the reams of informational material that were handed to me during the interview weekend and not giving it much consideration at the time, but little did I know how much that name would come to mean to me in months ahead.

My reaction towards seeing a Vietnamese name among the list of current students in this graduate program was not very enthusiastic. Not to say that I saw it as a negative thing, but I certainly was not jumping up and down about the prospect of meeting another Vietnamese student. It just did not really register; it was just another name. Perhaps it was because I was too focused on staying calm and impressing the faculty members and assistantship providers, or because I was functioning on a bare minimum of sleep from my travels. I remember the piece of advice that everybody gave me that weekend: "be yourself." But in introducing myself as Henry, something that I had been doing for ten years by this point, was I really following that advice and being true to myself?

An Introduction to Asian American Identity Development

The identity model developed by Kim (1981) is based on a study of Japanese women and is often cited as a general theory applicable to all groups of Asian Americans

(as cited in Torres & Hamilton, 2003, p. 60). Although not directly applicable to our nationalities, it is the most frequently utilized identity model, in research and in application, by student affairs practitioners today. We will explain the stages of Kim's model and follow with our individual narrative reflections, illustrating our often diverging and converging progress through the constant evolution of our names.

"Em ten gi?": The Ethnic Awareness Stage

According to Kim (1981), individuals in this stage of the model develop neutral or positive attitudes towards one's own ethnic origin. The development depends on the ethnic exposure, and for most individuals, the exposure is due to one's family members and caretakers.

To be something more (Hung). My name is Hung Mai, or rather, it was. It was the name my parents gave me when I was born, and it is the name with which I grew up. It appears on my driver's license, my health card, my insurance forms, my student ID, and every piece of official identification I possess. I went to a public elementary school and had friends that ran the gamut of racial and ethnic backgrounds. It was a place where I was comfortable being Hung and where I could count the number of Caucasian students on both hands and have fingers left over. I came home to a house that was bustling with family life, where everyone with my mother's maiden name lived under the same roof, and where the air always smelled like incense and lemongrass.

My parents tell me my name was meant to convey the meaning of endless potential and opportunity, but to make sure that I lived up to my name they felt like we had to leave Chinatown, leaving everything I just described. They wanted me to escape the gritty urban environment with its pollution, gangs, drugs, and violence, along with the routine of helping out in the family grocery store and making something more of myself. They wanted me to pursue a higher education, to be able to wear a suit to work, and to have opportunities that they did not.

"Home" name Versus "School" name (Châu/Patricia). My "school" name, Patricia Nguyen, in its Western form, is the name on my legal birth certificate. In aiming to comply with the image of the American "melting pot," my refugee parents chose a name that would lend itself to upward social mobility. Career research by Bertrand & Mullainathan (2004) has shown that applicants with ethnic names receive fewer call-backs than those with White-sounding names, a point personally relevant, especially since social mobility is so inextricably tied to economic wealth. To drive home the point even more, the meaning of Patricia is "of nobility." Coming from a life where they lost everything to get here, their dearest wish for their first daughter was to achieve the American dream in a country that was not, and still is not, theirs. The name seems to fit in with American society. It is common enough to avoid butchered pronunciations during attendance calls and proper enough to pass the first round of résumé cuts.

Following the first stage of the model, my parents gave me a name that would help me feel comfortable and positive in the dominant culture. I am American. My name, Patricia, is American, and anyone in the Western world can say it.

In contrast, my Vietnamese name would not lend itself to the same effects as Patricia. Châu looks like “chow” but is pronounced “chgoaw.” There is a consonant tone that many Americans cannot grasp, and if pronounced incorrectly with the slightest change in tone or inflection, my name’s meaning can change to “dandruff” or “ox.” Neither is pleasant to be associated with, especially when its actual meaning is “precious gem.” When reflecting upon my parents’ usage of these two names, Châu, my Vietnamese name, was more frequently used. My siblings followed the same suit. I rarely heard Patricia at home, and felt awkward when I heard my parents use it in public with non-Vietnamese individuals. When I’m at home, when all my guards are down, and where I’m most vulnerable, I am Châu. I am Vietnamese. When I’m out in public, encountering strangers, scared of my surroundings, I am Patricia. I am American. I do not think this was by choice, but rather demonstrated and exercised by my parents. They instilled in me that I was either one, or the other. It was just a matter of circumstance as to which identity, Châu or Patricia, Vietnamese or American, I would go by. When it came down to which name would win over my self-concept of identity, my parents would emphasize my “home” name. I heard it more frequently in times I was most exposed. On the outside I was Patricia, and deep down inside I was Châu.

“Your name sounds weird!”: The White Identification Stage

An individual’s self-esteem and identity are negatively impacted by racial prejudice from the dominant racial group in this stage. Realization of how one is different comes from the dominant White culture, and can lead to self-blame and abandonment of one’s own ethnic heritage. Furthermore, individuals in this stage may begin identifying with the dominant White culture (Kim, 1981).

My last name sucks (Patricia). I remember many times in elementary school when someone caught wind of my middle name, Châu, which is my “home” name. It devastated me. Classmates would ask me what the name meant, and when I explained, “It’s what they called me at home,” they viewed it as a chance to explore “the Asian peoples” and said things like, “That name sounds right for you! It sounds Asian-y!” I would shudder, feel ashamed, and grow angry with my parents for giving me a Vietnamese name; a name no one could pronounce. As Pyke and Dang (2003) note, I too felt the immense pressure to assimilate in order to distance myself from the stigma associated with my racial group, and so I would reply, “No, my name is Patricia Nguyen.” Looking back, even the pronunciation of my last name suffered from what my parents refer to as “Americanization.” Even though it is one of the six most common Asian surnames in the country (Lauderdale & Kestenbaum, 2000, p. 283), the majority of

people have a hard time pronouncing it due to the consonant on a soft tone. To pronounce a “NG” sound seemed impossible for my peers. In order to avoid negative Asian stereotypes, a pattern observed by Osajima (1993), I made special efforts at my predominately White institution (as cited in Pyke & Trang, 2003, p. 151). Instead of making sure individuals pronounced my name correctly, I would “Americanize” it, and it would sound like “New-win.” Clearly, no “G” sound is in that phonetic spelling, but it is obvious in the Vietnamese pronunciation. Why was I angry when people learned of my Vietnamese name? Why was I not bothered with this incorrect pronunciation of my last name? I wanted to be “normal.” I wanted at all costs to pass as American and be like everyone else.

Movin’ up in the world (Henry). Everything changed when I moved. All of the sudden, I was taken out of the environment I was used to and deposited somewhere foreign to me. The move from downtown Toronto to Kitchener was clearly a turning point in my life. Not only was it a geographical shift, but a cultural one as well. In his book about the struggles faced by children born to blue-collar parents who grow up to become white-collar citizens, Alfred Lubrano (2004) states, “When people talk about class, they’re referring to nothing less than a culture” (p. 4). My name is not just a factor in my racial and ethnic identity, but is inextricably tied to my social class identity as well.

Nobody forced me to change my name, but even when I lived in Toronto, all of my Asian friends had English names too. I remember Philip, Jonathan, Raymond, two Kenneths, Amy, Angela, and Helen. I felt that they had a piece of cultural capital that I did not and that in order to succeed in this new world, I needed an English name as well. I had moved up into the middle class suburbs and “Henry,” with its historical roots in the European monarchies, seemed to be a better fit for this new environment. I could picture Henry, Phillip, Jonathan, Raymond, Kenneth, Amy, Angela, or Helen wearing a suit to work, but not HƯNG.

“I don’t have an English name!”: The Awakening to Social Political Consciousness Stage Individuals enter this stage when their old perspective of conforming to White culture is interrupted with a new perspective that is often times paralleled with political awareness of the racial injustices in society. It results in a negative attitude towards the dominant White group and a passionate re-adoption of one’s ethnic culture and heritage (Kim, 1981).

“No Trish lives here” (Trish). Most people that are close to me know me as Trish. This is a personal invention; Patricia did not feel right after a history lesson in elementary school. I remember learning about the feudal system during my elementary school education. As the concepts of hierarchy and caste systems were introduced, I learned about the meaning behind Patricia. The messages conveying “nobility” were messages with which I neither identified, nor wanted to be associ-

ated. It wasn't fair how people became kings just by birth and treated the poor people of the kingdom badly. As an early interruption of old perspective (Kim, 1981) I did not want a name that symbolized this injustice, so I changed it to Trish.

My name change could also be a function of my new peer group in high school. My community up to this point was predominantly White. I was a token Asian. There are two sides to being the token individual: On one hand, it means you are unique, but more often than not, the people around you see you as an outsider (Jones, 1993, p. 3). All the elementary schools in my area fed into the same high school, so all the token Asian kids were finally able to meet each other. Not only did we meet, but we also became the best of friends and developed a rudimentary sense of Asian identity. We collectively realized that we had been deprived of each other's presence and the sense of community we now had.

My parents didn't respond well to my new name. When friends would call my house and ask for Trish, my father would reply, "Who? You must have the wrong number. No Trish lives here," and would then hang up the phone. Shortly after, I would be interrogated on why I had changed my name. When I would say it was a product of having new Vietnamese and Asian friends (thinking they would be happy I was connecting with people that shared my same identity), my father would ask, "Why don't they call you Châu then?" I realized I was attempting to balance an identity conflict, and Trish seemed to be a good solution.

Adrift (Hưng/Henry). I am a grain of yellow sand in a sea of white. Nothing has made this clearer to me than Vermont's demographic profile: nearly 98% of the state's population is White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). I notice it every time I walk around campus or downtown. I had been told during the interview for the graduate program here that it would be an adjustment, but I had no idea. There are days when I am content to float along with the current, believing that at some point, I will be carried back to a beach where I can just be. There are also days where I'm battered by the waves, constantly fighting just to stay afloat.

I cannot say that I have passionately re-adopted my ethnic culture and heritage here, but even against the tide, I am making slow progress. One of the greatest breakthroughs for me came earlier this year when I was ordering business cards. I must have spent an hour debating with my best friend from home whether my cards should read "Hưng Mai," "Henry Mai," "Hưng (Henry) Mai," or "Henry (Hưng) Mai." In the end, I chose to put my given name first out of a desire to start reconnecting with my ethnic identity, but also as a practical matter since that is the name that will be seen on all of my official documentation.

"VieT PRyDe!": The Redirection Stage

In this stage, an individual begins to reconnect with one's ethnic identity, while

mistrusting and blaming the dominant White group for the previous negative experiences around identity. Anger against White racism is demonstrated through an increased sense of racial and ethnic self, and group pride (Kim, 1981).

100% Viet (Châu). The redirection of my identity was as plain as the décor on my school binders. I remember writing “AZN PRYDE in the 619” all over and plastering them with sticker photos you could purchase for three dollars at the local Asian supermarket. We hung out together, dated each other, and were a very exclusive group. In fact we made t-shirts that said things like “Nothing but Viet Luv,” and “Got Rice?,” and proudly wore the Southern Vietnamese flag on our chests. We would only eat Asian food when we went out, made fun of anyone who could not use chopsticks, and used our “home” names. I could be Châu.

I was an avid subscriber to a popular online community for Asian Americans, AsianAvenue.com. In browsing the site, I came across the Asian American movement. I developed a passionate interest in issues such as sex trafficking and sweatshop labour. I became furious and angry at the White corporate monsters that were often involved in these acts of injustice. I no longer wanted to be American. I wanted to be Châu everywhere. I was going to be loud about my Vietnamese identity, and if a White person could not pronounce it, I went to extremes to make her/him/hir feel bad about it. It was not my fault their tongues were not as talented as mine.

Nowhere to go (Huong/Henry). I should first take this opportunity to thank Châu, because without her, I would not be writing this. It was she who suggested co-authoring this piece. It was only after sitting down, talking with her, and getting to know more about her that I began thinking about my own identity. But if I redirect myself, where am I supposed to go? Everywhere I look, I see whiteness. Unlike Châu, I do not have a critical mass of ethnically similar individuals with whom to associate in my present environment. She is, in fact, the only other Vietnamese person I have met since high school. As much as I blame the dominant group for the negative identity-related experiences I have had, who can I relate to? As noted earlier, Vietnamese culture relies heavily on family and community, and both feel like they are a world away.

“I am Vietnamese American/Canadian”: The Incorporation Stage

An individual in this stage has a positive and comfortable sense of one’s identity and respect for others, including the dominant White group (Kim, 1981).

Looking down on a spiral staircase (Trish/Châu/Patricia). At the age of 25, I cannot say I have reached this stage in its entirety. I find moments where I am comfortable and even happy to be both. I find more moments where it feels like a constant conflict, straddling between the two contrasting identities. I still go by Châu at home, Trish to my friends and colleagues, and Patricia on paper. In line with the Vietnamese tradition, I have indeed invited complexity into my life. I

wish I was more empowered by my multiple names, but, at this point in my life, the conflicting identities bring on feelings of confusion, burden, anger, and sadness. I still hesitate and cringe a little when people ask me, “What name do you prefer?” It still feels like I have to choose one name, a single identity to be me.

I do find moments where the multiple names are self-empowering. As I continually develop a sense of social consciousness, I feel fluid in my identity, and not confined to the boxes of social construction. As a professional, I can sign petitions, memos, and reports with “Patricia Châu Nguyen” and be confident that although my race or ethnicity can be identified, that it is more of a reason to find validity in my signature. As a daughter, I can feel the closeness to my family and a return to my roots when I pick up the phone and hear “Hi Châu!” from my little sister. As a friend, I know there is someone dear to me in a concert or protest crowd when “Trish!” resonates in the air. As a student affairs practitioner, I can relate to a diversity of Asian American student experiences with something as “small” as the story behind my name. I feel like I am walking up and down a spiral staircase as I go through the stages of Kim’s model again and again, sometimes over a period of years, sometimes within a couple of hours. As I am on this staircase, I can look up and down the well and see into myself. It has helped me build a great sense of self-awareness, and a strong basis from which to work towards social justice. I firmly believe it is hard to understand the experiences of anyone, marginalized or privileged, if you do not understand your own. Cheers to Châu, Patricia, and Trish.

A melting mosaic (Huong/Henry). I am not yet at a stage where I can reconcile these two different parts of my identity. If asked, I would likely tell people that I am a Vietnamese-Canadian, but does placing one identity in front of the other in this hyphenated model mean that one takes primacy over the other? I am not sure my Vietnamese identity can come first because although I was raised in a Vietnamese household, I do not have a firm sense of my family’s culture and traditions, and I am not sure it would be fair to identify myself with something which I do not necessarily have full knowledge.

Being the only Canadian in an American program, I often find myself using my country of citizenship as my identifier, but this too is often a struggle. Because my home country is located next to one of the world’s superpowers, Canadian identity is often framed as a negative definition—what we are not (namely, American). According to Li (2007), “whether hyphenated or not, the new identity categories are meant to convey a set of social meanings” (p. 24). While it is true that there are certain images and values that are associated with Canadians (such as the Mountie in red ceremonial garb, a love of hockey, and a socialist national policy that includes services such as publicly funded health care), I am not sure that taken as a whole or individually, these come any closer to defining who I am. While I appreciate the privileges that I have grown up with, I am unsure whether

this equates to a respect for the dominant culture within which I was raised. I question how far I will get, having grown up in the dominant culture and being immersed in its values and messages, in attempting to integrate these two halves of me into one. Tanaka (1972), in his analysis of Canadian social structure and its effect on Asian Canadian social discourse suggests that, “the dominant culture’s exclusionary practice is involuntarily supported by assimilated Asian Canadian [artists], who tend to disassociate themselves from their own community and ‘ethnic past’” (cited in Li, 2007, p. 19). The bigger question is why I felt like I needed to change my name at all. According to Takeshita, racism has been relegated to the fringe of society, and therefore complaints of racism must be an irrational pathology in the minds of minorities themselves. The consensus among many is that minorities should focus on “changing their minds rather than on changing American society” (2007, p. 261).

Canada has a strong commitment to multiculturalism and the “mosaic” approach, which encourages immigrants to hold onto their cultural particularities. This is constantly contrasted with the American “melting pot” approach that strongly encourages immigrants to become “un-hyphenated” Americans (Dyck, 2004, p. 216). Takeshita brings up an interesting contradiction in speaking about the appeal of abandoning cultural traditions by questioning, “Who wants to voluntarily become a flat stereotype?” (2007, p. 263), and at the same time, considering whether “choice away from the tradition represents ethnic disloyalty or perhaps a deeper self-hatred, or if it’s simply a matter of being ‘modern’” (p. 262). This is a debate I have had with myself for a long time in regards to my two identities, and it has not gotten much closer to being solved.

What Does All of This Mean for Practice?

A person’s name is very much a part of who they are, or in some cases, who they are not. For some, introducing themselves is a reflexive action that comes as naturally as breathing. There is a certain sense of security that comes from knowing who you are and being able to express this to others by confidently completing the phrase, “My name is...” a feeling that we, and many others like us, have not been able to share. In writing this, we have made sense of our names and what they mean to our lives, and we hope that by sharing our experiences we are able to shine a light on a silent struggle.

The process of realizing an identity is a fluid one. It could take a lifetime, it can happen several times within a day, and maybe it will never fully happen at all. Our conversation demonstrates that theories only provide a guideline to help practitioners understand some of the issues students face, but cannot fully represent the diverse body of experiences of Asian students. This can be detrimental to students and may lead to, “poorly informed and designed [interventions] because they are based on an inaccurate model minority myth furthered by research on aggregated Asian Americans” (Chang & Le, 2005, p. 240). Working with students is much more complex

than just reciting theories. “These are topics that academics spend a lifetime studying, but for . . . students, an answer is needed not just for intellectual satisfaction but for the practical reason of living” (Takeshita, 2007, p. 262). For us, understanding our names is more than a mere academic pursuit: it is how we walk in the world.

Ho (1987) and Huang (1994) note that Asian Americans are the most diverse ethnic group in the United States. At an institution such as ours, where the entire non-White population is grouped under an umbrella term for people of color, names can provide a way for students to separate themselves from the masses. The University of Vermont uses the acronym ALANA, which stands for Asian, Latino/a, African, and Native American. Yet this term is debated since it does not include every group and leaves no room for those who identify as biracial or multiracial. The term Asian can be broken down even further. Our surnames identify us as Vietnamese, whereas other names can correspond to students of Chinese, Korean, Thai, Japanese, Cambodian, Pacific Islander, Filipino, or any number of other backgrounds. Each is rich with its own unique culture and tradition, and it is unfair to assume that all Asian students ascribe to the same values. This is not to say that surnames are the definitive marker of racial or ethnic identities, but it is a step above a blanket term. According to Chang & Le (2005) census statistics based on aggregated data suggest that Asian Americans experience financial and educational success and therefore do not require any assistance in terms of public service and resources (p. 240). Aggregating Asian demographic data for institutional use such as enrollment management, climate surveys, and accreditation reports marginalizes specific and diverse ethnicities.

When working with any salient identity, whether it is race, ability, ethnicity, sexual or gender identity, religion, or socio-economic class, student affairs practitioners should proactively seek out the student's preference for being addressed. With names, it is important that every effort is made to correctly pronounce the student's name. Asking them how to pronounce their name goes a long way towards demonstrating sensitivity about the issue. Based on our experiences, the only thing more mortifying than having your name mangled in front of a class or a meeting is when the speaker does not even ask whether they have pronounced it correctly and continues blithely to mispronounce it. Our recommendations are not limited to our personal experiences as Vietnamese American/Canadian college students, but can be extended to other marginalized student populations as well.

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