

ENGLISH: *EXPLORING ISSUES OF IDENTITY AND BELONGING*

“The meaning or significance of your first name or surname or both”

The “Sweet” King Urine

“How do you pronounce it again?”

I felt my features contort themselves into a grimace. For what seemed to be the umpteenth time, another one of my friends had asked me about my middle name. I was starting to regret letting them have the indulgence of knowing it in the first place.

Silence, and then: “Huy...like Huey”. The words came out of my pursed lips through clenched teeth. The peer group that surrounded me could feel the ubiquitous tension.

One of my wise-cracking friends: “Sounds like wee”.

The group burst into laughter, and to my surprise, I found myself joining in. From that moment on, I was the group’s urinal.

To explain my last name I have to divulge into the Vietnamese language. I give you, the dummy’s guide to Vietnamese:

1. There are only 22 letters in the alphabet, 29 if you count the “special cousins” that are accented.
2. We stole the alphabet from both the English and Chinese (with a hint of French). Case in point, look at the Vietnamese word for fish: “cá”. We still use English letters, but our symbols for accents are reminiscent of the French.
3. All of our words are single-syllabic, i.e. to make more sophisticated words you have to combine more than one word.
4. Because of our limited alphabet and heavy reliance on accents, if you pronounce just one word with the wrong accent, you are in deep trouble. My mother (who is a Vietnamese teacher) has encountered this problem many times, often ensuing in hilarity. The Vietnamese-Australian kids she teaches often have their tongues weighed down by the broad Australian accent. Their Viet mothers and fathers (the traditions of Vietnam still heavy on their shoulders) fear for them, scared that the Vietnamese culture could ultimately dissipate in future generations. Sending them to the weekly Vietnamese school seems like the perfect solution does it not? How wrong they were. In most cases, the kids would lose motivation, their Australianised upbringing overpowering their Vietnamese heritage.

Back to my mother. Remember what I said earlier about accents? Well let me just reiterate their importance. “Củ dền” is a traditional Vietnamese vegetable, a staple in Vietnamese cuisine. In Australia it is more commonly known as the radish. My mother was teaching this word to the whole class, and sadly, one of the less-abled students (who was exposed to English for a majority of his life) pronounced it as “cu den” – ignoring the accents altogether. What ensued was a long bout of laughter – no not from the kids – from my mother. “Cu Den” translates crudely to black penis.

My last name, Duong, can therefore be translated in many ways, depending on how and where you place the accents. If written as Đuống I am never wrong. I am never to be criticised, never to be argued with, because Đuống means “correct”. With Đưóng I am stoic, insipid- the unswaying

mountain in the relentless monsoon, since Đứng translates to “standing” or “adamant”. When you rearrange the accents so it spells Dương I am part of the legendary trio- aqua, terra and ventus. I swallow ships whole, take up three forms and am the universal solvent – the “ocean”. However, perhaps my favourite version of my multi-faceted surname is Đường. I am the icing on the cake; the thing that children beg their parents for. The innocent but merciless killer, the mastermind behind obesity and diabetes. You may have one of my teeth in your mouth. Đường translates to “sugar” or “sweet”.

Now to a personal favourite, my first name. I’ve always liked how it sounded- David. However, I never did learn the true meaning behind the name until I was late into my teens. It was Humanities class; we were discussing the Bible, and its implications on society. As a result, the topic of Jewish and Hebrew culture surfaced like bubbles rising in a can of fizzy pop. Our perspicacious teacher started digressing (much to the class’s enjoyment mainly for two reasons: one being that we were avoiding classwork and the second being that he was often described as a walking encyclopaedia; a wealth of knowledge). He started talking about the significance of names and how they may hold a historical or biblical background. For instance, going around the room we had Joshua and David- two names of Hebrew origin. Joshua- saviour of the gods, and David, King of Israel. What a grand name that was! Though I was not of royal blood, I was already a king. In a distant and past life, I ruled a country. I led others into battle. I slayed the goliath. I am proud to say that my name is a part of history, and is a prominent aspect in a religion.

It wasn’t just the literal and historical meaning of my first name that made me cherish it so, but the circumstance that led me to be crowned with such a royal name. You see, my mother was a very proud woman, she did not conform with others in buying books to find names for her children. No, she wanted to be unique, different from the flocks of sheep. So that was why both me and my brother’s names were named after the doctors that helped her give birth. Looking back it seems fitting - the passing of a name. The mantle that shifts shouldlers with each life that is introduced into the world.

So there you have it. David Huy Duong. Or if you rearrange it, Duong David Huy, roughly translated to “sugar king urine”- though I think “the sweet king urine” has a much nicer ring to it. Sure, there may be a thousand or so David’s or Huy’s or Duong’s, but none that have them all together, in a unique meld and mashup such as mine, and none with such a unique story behind it. My name is mine alone; an extension of my individuality; the one thing in the world that truly speaks on behalf of me. If I am to be immortalised in history, people will not remember me for my feats or my appearance; it will be for my name.

There are many things that define us: moments, actions or appearances. But nothing defines us more than the name we are given. Like cattle, we have our names branded onto us the moment we are born, and although some may wish to don a new identity, their birth names will always cling to them. When asked who you are, what is the first thing most people would answer with? It is your name.