

"In My Humble Opinion" segment - PBS News Hour - March 18, 2021

Transcript

- **Judy Woodruff:**

Now: a reflection on heritage and how, in the melting pot of America, a name can provide a concrete link to family traditions.

Filmed before the Georgia shootings,* writer Te-Ping Chen recently shared her Humble Opinion that people need to embrace their ethnic names and not shy away from them.

- **Te-Ping Chen:**

As a child, I was given a boy's name. Ours was a family of three girls, but my parents wanted to honor my paternal grandfather. I was their last child, so I wound up with his name.

For years, my name, Te-Ping, has made me feel incredibly conspicuous. Growing up in California, I learned to hate introducing myself, because so few people could ever pronounce my name.

Tee-ping, they'd say. Tuh-ping, they'd say. My cheeks would burn, and I'd feel stiffly uncomfortable, like a searching spotlight moving over a crowd had suddenly fixed on me. In Chinese, the name sounds gently affectionate and lilting to my ears. The Te means virtue. Ping means peace.

But, in English, the letters looked clumsy to me on a page, awkward and off-balance. At restaurants and in coffee shops, I grew used to giving out a fake name. It was easier than hearing someone stumble over mine.

And yet my parents were proud of the name, proud of what it stood for. They were Americans, but they hadn't left their heritage behind. Our family tradition of names dates back centuries, to the Song dynasty, with every generation's name taking a different character from a poem Ming-Chong-Shu (ph), and, in my generation's case, Te.

Why would they throw that away for a Jessica or a Molly, a name that had no meaning to them?

I now understand. We name ourselves to honor our forbearers who carried us here, a beloved grandmother, a so-and-so III. We anchor ourselves that way. We acknowledge the soil we're made from.

History is precious. It doesn't survive unless you choose to embrace it. For so many years, my name has felt like a flag that's stuck out bristling from any form or name tag. But that's OK. It's a name that's made me think hard about identity.

In that way, it's helped make me who I am, even when it's uncomfortable.

I recently had a son, and we gave him a Chinese name, too. His name means joy. It didn't occur to me to do it any other way. There's strength in saying that, yes, you're here, we're here.

So what if the tongue stumbles? This is where we come from, and these are our names.

*On March 16, 2021, 8 people were killed in mass shootings at 3 spas or massage parlors in the metropolitan area of Atlanta, GA. The victims included 6 Asian women. Suspect Robert Aaron Long, age 21, was arrested. The possibility that these were hate crimes deliberately targeting Asian women is being investigated.