

「插旗」 Raising the Flag

我重有好多嘢講 I have lots to say outside the lines

When I came to “Ga Na Di” as a child, I was given a new name in English, an alias. I ended up with the name of a British royal—a name I couldn’t pronounce nor spell for years. It never felt comfortable, nor eventually yield like new shoes. I finally changed it back to the Romanised form of the Chinese name, just before entering university. In recent years, I have taken to show my true name 馬鳳齡 along with the Latin spelling, for non-readers. But looking at “Fung Ling” doesn’t mean anything other than a bunch of letters, whereas 「鳳齡」 provides rich meaning and clues about my family’s background and the generational name shared.

Given that Chinese is a tone language, there are aspects to consider that do not exist in English or other Latin-based languages. For example, there are many pitches in the Chinese language that allow for playful puns with homophones. Also visually, the chosen Chinese characters matter in terms of aesthetics. The beautiful written word not only conveys meaning but brings along layers of nuances.

Most Chinese given names are two words. One refers to a generational name that is common with all the male or female siblings and paternal cousins. With two words in my given name, I spend lots of time explaining things to people who insist on the European naming convention. Front desk people invariably call out “Fung” and ignore “Ling”. I remind them each and every time to correct my file, which never happens. One day I met a clerk who argued with me and told me “Ling” is my middle name. She is telling me what my name is in a volume loud enough for the entire waiting room to hear. I tried to calmly explain that I don’t have a middle name, and that is a European convention which doesn’t exist in my culture. Some years ago, I accompanied my mother in a Toronto hospital waiting room, listening for her name to be called. They called only one word in her Chinese given name along with her married surname. It sounded so awkward that I didn’t even recognise it. But my mother did. Apparently, she is accustomed to this clumsy mishmash of her name. She laughed it off.

These anecdotes are but light examples of how Chinese names are mistaken, disrespected, and even erased in a Eurocentric retelling of history. Having no Chinese names documented in official records meant the people and their stories were lost forever in the alphabet soup of Anglo society.

This is often why I include my name in Chinese characters. Otherwise, sometime in the distant future, researchers may be wracking their brains trying to figure out the name in Chinese. Like how I did when I was searching for Chinatown’s history in the Anglo archives of Canada. We have spared them that.

