

## 命名 (The Name of Life)

*My earliest memory is learning to write the word 哭 (kū) or “cry.” I remember sitting at a tiny plastic table with my maternal grandfather, my Lǎoye, watching him trace out the strokes. “Don’t forget that ‘tear,’ ” he’d said, pointing to the tiny dot on the right side of the character. “Think of it as your Gē Gē crying because you ate all his porridge.” The idea of my older brother crying had made me giggle. I never forgot how to write “cry.”*

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In my family, I always felt like the odd one out. The only one born in the United States, the only one who was a second child, the only one who had a different name. As a young child, I loved my uniqueness, and more than anything, I loved my Chinese name 爱玛 (Àimǎ), 爱 (ài) meaning “love” and 玛 (mǎ) meaning “agate,” a red marbled stone. I’d always known that my name was different from my brother’s and my cousins’, but for the longest time, I didn’t know why.

Strangely enough, in spite of how much I loved my Chinese name, until I visited China for the first time, I never considered myself anything but American. I remember seven-year-old me sitting in my Lǎoye and Lǎo Lǎo’s living room at the start of my visit, watching the summer Olympics with my aunt. When asked whether I was American or Chinese, I responded “American!” with no hesitation. I refused to cheer for any team but Team USA.

By the end of the month, my answer had changed. Meeting my extended family and living in China for a month had made me realize that in addition to being American, I was also Chinese. In just a few weeks, I went from only speaking to my brother in English, to telling my aunt, in Chinese, that maybe I wanted Team China to win the synchronized diving event. Maybe, I told myself, I wanted to be Chinese.

After returning home, I started going to Chinese school on the weekend. For the next ten years, I would spend an hour and a half in a church or rec center every Sunday, learning new characters and scrawling messy sentences into an endless supply of gridded notebooks. The more Chinese I learned, the more the Chinese part of me leaked into my identity. It bled into my speech until, as one of my friends described it, both my English and my Chinese had an accent that was “neither American nor Chinese.” Despite my friend’s assertion, I was certain that I was both. I was both Àimǎ and Emma, both Chinese and American.

When I was twelve, I visited China again. This time, after staying with my maternal grandmother, my Lǎo Lǎo, for two weeks, we took a train even farther north, to Hā'ěrbīn, to visit my father’s parents. It was during our stay in Hā'ěrbīn that my paternal grandfather, my Yé Yé, showed me our family genealogy book. That was the first time I learned about generation names. I still remember it like it happened yesterday.

“You know, Yuán Yuán,” my Yé Yé had said, calling me by my childhood nickname. “Every generation in our family has a generation name. That means every person in the same generation as us shares one character of their given name. My generation’s generation name is Ēn, your father’s generation’s is Lín, and your generation’s is Jí. When you were born, I wanted to name you Jíwēi, but your parents insisted on Àimǎ.” I had never heard about this family tradition before, and the idea that my name might be anything other than Àimǎ stunned me. Even if I had had the Chinese skills to do so, I couldn’t have possibly found the right words to respond.

When he saw that I wasn’t going to say anything, my Yé Yé took the opportunity to open the genealogy book and show me its contents. He pointed to my cousins’ and my brother’s names. “Every one of your cousins has the character Jí in their name. It lets our descendants

know who was a part of our family and what role they had in it.” He moved his finger to another name, a name I didn’t recognize. “This is you. I wrote your name as Jíwēi instead of Àimǎ in the genealogy book. Now your name will have the Jí character too, and our descendants will know that you were a part of this generation of this family.”

At the time, I couldn’t say anything to my grandfather. I’d simply nodded along mutely to show him that I understood. But everything inside of me had wanted to yell out, “I’m not Jíwēi, I’m Àimǎ!” I’d never been more sure of anything in my life. I had always been Àimǎ, and although I tried not to let it show, I was angry at my Yé Yé for changing my name. I was angry at him for changing my identity.

A few days later, my family took the train back to my Lǎo Lǎo’s house. Two weeks after that, we flew back to the United States. Despite how sure I had been about being Àimǎ, the only thing I could think about the whole time was what my Yé Yé had said to me.

*Jíwēi. Jíwēi. Jíwēi.* No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t get my would-be name out of my head. Jí meaning lucky. Wēi meaning rose, or maybe gentle. A lucky rose? A gentle and lucky girl? I’d taken years of Chinese school at this point, but even with the help of a dictionary, I could never be one hundred percent certain I had the characters right. Either way, Jíwēi was a beautiful name to be sure.

Over the course of the next five years, I continued going to Chinese school on the weekends, took the AP Chinese exam in high school, and visited China for the third time. I never told my parents I knew about Jíwēi, but I never forget about her either. At twelve, I had wanted to rebel furiously against this less-American, more-Chinese version of me, but as I grew older, I began to waver. I became uncertain about who I was and who I was meant to be.

The more I learned about Chinese names, the more I thought about Jíwēi, a name that was elegant, subtle, and so, so Chinese. Traditionally, generation names were a form of familial connection. No matter how dispersed the family became, a generation name served as a marker, a sign that two people shared a connection. My mother, my father, my brother, and I lived in the United States, half a world away from the rest of my family. I barely knew any of my relatives. Sometimes, I couldn't help but wonder if part of the reason I felt so estranged from my extended family was because I lacked the connection of a generation name. Had my Yé Yé been right to write Jíwēi instead of Àimǎ?

I wasn't so sure about Àimǎ anymore. When I was in elementary school, I had loved everything about my Chinese name. I had loved the meaning of the characters. I had loved the sound of its beautiful Chinese tones. I had loved how it sounded so similar to my English name Emma. For the longest time, I had loved how my parents had given me two names that connected my two backgrounds.

But the more I studied Chinese, the more I realized how “American” my Chinese name was. Àimǎ seemed to lack a certain subtlety that most Chinese names possessed. It seemed to me, that unlike Americans, Chinese people didn't even say anything as shameless as “我爱你” (wǒ ài nǐ) or “I love you.” I wondered if having “Ài” (love) in a name was something only an American-born Chinese kid would have. Instead of connecting me to my family, was my Chinese name itself a marker of just how un-Chinese I really was?

During my third visit to China, a distant uncle had gotten drunk and joked that I was like a banana. “Yellow on the outside, but white on the inside!” he'd declared. I'd laughed with him, but really, he was right, wasn't he? On the outside, I looked just as Chinese as the rest of my family members, but on the inside, I could never be quite like them. For a while, it seemed that

the more Chinese I wanted to become, the more unhappy I became with the American part of myself.

When I was seventeen, I went to summer camp and became friends with an international student from China. After talking for a long time, we arrived on the topic of Chinese names. “Àimǎ?” he had asked. “Isn’t that just how they say Emma in Chinese?” Although he didn’t mean anything by it, his question felt like a slap in the face.

One of my favorite things about Chinese names was how unique they were. Parents usually put a lot of thought into a name, and each one was supposed to have a special meaning. I knew my Chinese name and English name were similar, but I’d always thought that my parents had picked my Chinese name first before picking the similar-sounding Emma. For some reason, the reverse, the idea that my parents had simply transliterated my common English name into Chinese, was something I almost couldn’t bear. As soon as I arrived home from camp, I confronted my mother.

“What does my Chinese name mean?” I asked her.

“Why do you ask?” she responded calmly. “I think you already know. 爱 (ài) means ‘love,’ and 玛 (mǎ) means ‘agate.’”

“I know that, but why did you give me that name?” I pressed, my voice growing slightly tighter with each question. “Someone told me Àimǎ was just how you said Emma in Chinese. Is that how you picked my Chinese name? Was it really just because Àimǎ sounded like Emma?”

My mother raised her eyebrows, surprised by my desperation. “No,” she said. “Not at all. If anything, I’d say we picked Emma and Àimǎ at the same time. I’ve always loved the character 玛 (mǎ), even from the time I was a little girl. Did you know that in China, red agate symbolizes

longevity? Your dad and I picked the character 爱 (ài) to go with it because we wanted you to remember that love lasts forever.”

*Love lasts forever.* I don't know if that answer satisfied me. Even now, I can't stop thinking about what it means to be American, to be Chinese, to be Chinese-American. But my mother's words did make me remember something important: Jíwēi, a less-American and more-Chinese version of me, never could have existed. With China's one-child policy in place well into the mid-2010s, the only version of me that could possibly exist was the one that existed now. The only version of me that I could be was the Americanized Chinese, Chinese-American version of me.

I don't think I'll ever stop thinking about Jíwēi. I don't think I'll ever stop wishing I knew more Chinese. But I think talking to my mother helped me accept myself. I am Àimǎ and Emma, a second child of Chinese immigrants, a girl who will never be 100% Chinese nor 100% American but is and always has been 100% Chinese-American.

I know I'll always be a mix of things, but maybe there was nothing wrong with that. I could be both Chinese and American, and I could be proud to be both. I could cheer for Team USA and Team China. In the end, I suppose the conclusion I arrived at was the same one I'd started with: my Yé Yé was wrong. I wasn't Jíwēi. I was Àimǎ. And that was exactly who I should be. By simply being born, I had already won.

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*I should have been too young to remember anything, but my Lǎoye had still taken the time to teach me Chinese every day. I've long since forgotten almost everything he'd taught me, and I've long since forgotten almost everything about him. But even as life moves on, I've never*

*forgotten that one memory. I've never forgotten to add the 'tear' in "cry" (哭). So, in the end, I think I choose to believe my parents. I choose to believe that love lasts forever.*