

Yeon-Hee Yim  
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Identity – Culture, Emotions, and Behavior

Being exposed to both the Korean and American cultures has given me two sets of morals and mannerisms to live by. This has significantly affected my perspective of life and has forced me to ask myself, “who am I,” and “where do I fit in,” especially when the cultures’ standards clash. Identity is something I have been in conflict with ever since I can remember and one of the largest contributors has been the name that I call myself. This may sound confusing, but there are several aspects to my given birth name and its translation into English that actively affect my sense of identity.

First of all, I was born in Kwang-Ju, South Korea and my given birth name is: 임연희. In Korean the family name comes before the first name, so the script above reads: “Yim Yeon Hee.” Fronting the family name is definitely a marker of the collectivistic culture of Korea, which always makes me an “임” before I am “연희.” I consider myself a 1 ½ generation Korean-American because I was born in Korea, but raised bilingually and biculturally in America. Because of this, I have absorbed traits from both collectivism and individualism. From collectivism I have learned to place a great amount of importance on family and to take care of my elders’ needs before taking care of myself. I feel like my life’s work needs to bring pride to my family, but from individualism I have learned that my life is ultimately *my* life and I should be who I want to be, study what I want to study, and have whatever job I will be happy with. The problem is that sometimes my family disagrees with the choices I make for myself and I am always fighting with them and with myself because of it. I identify with and understand both cultures and often, I find myself being used as a bridge between my first generation Korean immigrant parents and my second generation siblings.

When dealing with the spelling and pronunciation of my name, there are three main things to consider: my first name, the hyphen in my first name, and my last name. Besides these things, there are many instances of language conflict to consider.

When I immigrated to America, my first name was translated into English with three different spellings on legal papers --- *Yon Hee*, *Yun Hee*, and *Yeon Hee*. This presented huge problems. One is obviously a legal issue, but let us consider the more relevant issues of spelling and pronunciation. I remember a time when my parents showed me these spellings and told me to choose which one I liked the best and somehow I ended up choosing the spelling “Yeon Hee.” Interestingly enough, ‘ ㅟ ’ is transcribed as “yeo” in the Revised Romanization of Korean, which is what the South Korean government uses in all of their English publications. Although this is a perfectly legitimate spelling, I ran into problems when trying to get people to pronounce my name correctly. To the western eye, it seems the vowels within “yeo” should be pronounced as a diphthong. The problem is, that “yeo” actually stands for one consonant plus one vowel, which transcribed in the International Phonetic Alphabet is [jɕ]. It became so difficult to get people to pronounce my name correctly that without thinking about it I formulated two generally set pronunciations --- [jɕian hi] or a variant thereof for use with Caucasian people and [jɕn hi] for use otherwise. When I lived in Kennewick, WA and later in Yakima, WA these pronunciations basically translated into school and family domains respectively, but now that I live in Seattle and there are more Asians at school, these domains are colliding. It is becoming easier to shift the pronunciation of my name back to what it should be, but having two distinctly different pronunciations almost makes me feel like two different people. It is hard to describe in what way, but I feel like I subconsciously rank people on a spectrum of familiarity that describes how well a person knows me and how well I know them.

I like to think that I treat everyone the same no matter how I am called, but I have a feeling that this is not the case. For example in Korean, when a person summons another person of equal or lesser status, they can say the first name + “ㅇㅏ” [ja] for names that end in a vowel, or + “ㅇㅏ” [a] for names that end in a consonant. I grew up hearing: “연희ㅇㅏ!” [jɕni ja]! from my parents, and have grown an almost extra-sensory sensitivity to hearing this utterance. In Korean culture, when a child is called by their parents in this way, they are expected to respond with “네, 엄마” (yes, mother) or “네, 아빠” (yes, father) and go to them as quickly as possible ready to do any errand asked of them. There is no doubt that I respond to this more quickly and receptively than I would respond to “Hey Yeon-Hee!” which is the rough English equivalent. One of my good Caucasian-American friends picked up this phrase as she heard my parents call for me in this way at home. The first time my friend called me this way, I smiled and saw her in a new way that strengthened my end of our friendship exponentially. I was instantly ready to hear what she had to say and hearing this phrase said out of context brought me a comforting sense of family, security, and home that would otherwise not be found in any person outside of the family.

As a bilingual, I have sometimes found it difficult to differentiate between the meanings of sentences that change with the emphasis for example, the summoning phrase “Hey **Yeon-Hee...**” which has emphasis on the name, and the greeting “**Hey** Yeon-Hee!” which has its emphasis on “Hey”. In Korean culture summoning and greeting do not share the same word as American culture does with the word “hey.” There is also an added difficulty because what is translated as “hello” into English is “안녕하세요?” [anjɕNhasejo] which is actually a question in Korean that has a meaning closer to “how are you?” than “hello.” I have found that English is very declaratory language whereas in Korean is very polite with many added grammatical features that can make statements sound like a question.

Hyphenating my first name was a decision I gradually made over time. I ultimately decided to include a hyphen because without it, there is question whether ‘Yeon’ or ‘Yeon Hee’ is my first name. There was a time when the mood I was in determined whether I would include a hyphen, but now I always include a hyphen and it has become an integral part of my name, not just an optional marker that conjoins my name.

With regards to my last name, the translation from ‘임’ to ‘Yim’ looks phonetically like this: ‘임’ = [im] → Yim = [jim]. What happened was the vowel was lowered from [i] as in “ream” to [ɪ] as in “rim” and the consonant ‘y’ was added in front of the vowel to make it easier to say. I can deal with my first name being pronounced differently, but every time I say or hear my last name pronounced [jim], I feel like I am being misrepresented. My parents raised me to have a great sense of pride in being Korean and sometimes this makes me feel like any Americanization of Korean things is negative and unauthentic. This is ironic because while Korean is technically my first language and English my second, I cannot speak my L1 as fluently as a Korean third grader. My parents insist that I am 100% Korean, but I know that if I was placed in a situation among Koreans, I could not disguise myself as a full Korean. I simply do not have the same command of the Korean language as I do with English, which is a shame. When I try to communicate in Korean, I find myself lacking the vocabulary to be articulate. I find myself experimenting with words that I’ve picked up or code switching to English to fill in words I do not know in Korean. Sometimes I feel like even two languages is not enough to communicate my feelings properly because while I have more than one language to communicate with, the people I converse with do not always have the same languages in their repertoire.

In my elementary school days, having a name that is so different from everybody else's made it difficult for me to feel like everybody else. On top of that, whether categorized alphabetically by first name or last, I would often times be listed as the last person. Being "Yeon-Hee Yim," I was often cubby number 26 at the bottom of six rows. This didn't bother me much at first, but after three years I felt a bit undercut and in a way, second class. Ever since then, I've imagined what it would be like to have a "normal" last name, or a first name that people would be able to pronounce. Even now, I hesitate when people ask for my name at fast food restaurants because I know I have to spend time to spell it for them when the worker probably doesn't care and will probably say it wrong anyways.

It is obvious that language is essential to a person's concept of identity and it is amazing how much something as simple as my name has affected my whole sense of self. Although I have so much trouble with it, I don't think I could ever give it up for an American name because that would further remove me from my concept of self.