

# A Tale of Three Names

by **Jaeyeong Jeong**

鄭載永 (*Zhèng Zài Yǒng*). My Chinese name, originating from three letters: 鄭 (*zhèng*), which signifies 'country,' 載 (*zài*), which signifies 'to fill,' and 永 (*yǒng*), which signifies 'long.' What my grandparents were originally aiming for was 道, which means 'to know the right way,' but they chose 永 by mistake, changing the meaning from 'to lead the country in the right way' to 'to fill the country for a long period of time.'

*Tony Jeong*. My English name, originating from a piece of paper that I randomly chose out of a plastic container labeled 'The Name Box' for my English academy when I was eight years old. I recall wanting to pick again after the initial name assignment, then being extremely disappointed by the 'can't-take-it-back' rule of the academy. Only after the release of the first *Iron Man* movie did I become content with 'Tony': an Italian name assigned to a Korean boy.

정재영 (*Jeong Jae Yeong*). My Korean name. The first three letters that I identified as myself.

These are my three names. They are not three versions of a single name, but three distinct titles. 鄭載永 is the most poised and reserved out of the three names, who prefers the adjectives 'calm' and 'respectful' over 'creative' and 'individualistic.' Tony is the most outgoing, with an energy level dialed to the max and a positive view of life affected by American optimism. 정재영, stuck in the middle, is the mixture of both worlds. Juggling these labels became an instinctive reflex I was forced to learn as a Korean teenager. I used my Chinese name to sign official documents: a custom present in Korea since the fourteenth-century Chosun Dynasty. I used my English name when my English academies put them as an enrollment requirement. Now, I switch between my three names depending on different situations, like name tags in a room full of people I don't know.

What does a name hold? Is it just a hereditary component that our parents hand down to us, like freckles or the ability to tongue-roll? Or does it signify something more central to us? In her essay "In History," Jamaica Kincaid explores the idea that names are the sum of a certain demographic's history. "What should history mean to someone like me?" Kincaid asks, an inquiry encouraged by her original name, Elaine Potter Richardson (621). She is asking why a person like her, who is not descended from the white colonizers of her island, Antigua, has an English name and learns British history

in school. Where does she stand in that history? When I first read her essay, I felt an uneasiness I initially assumed was based on the uncanny similarity between her Antiguan narrative and my 'Korean' narrative. A changed name means a changed culture; a changed culture means a changed history. Provoked by Kincaid's frustration pinpointing her place in the western narrative she is forced to accept as her own, I launched my own historical inquiry based on the three identities I loosely call mine. What am I to feel about my three names and the cultural connotations each one holds? Am I to brood about my fractured identity, accept it, or even forgive it?

Perhaps I could learn from the way Kincaid reflects on the colonizers of Antigua. Her tone is bitter as she laments the arrival of Christopher Columbus, who, she claims, began the process of erasing the island's own history: "after many, many days on the ocean, finding new lands whose existence he had never even heard of before, he . . . empties the land of these people and then he empties the people, he just empties the people" (Kincaid 623). Think about what you 'empty' in normal day life – boxes, barrels, and trash bins – and how little thought you put into 'emptying' these objects. Kincaid's anger is targeted toward the carelessness and self-validation of the people who wiped out the preexisting narrative of indigenous people, emptying the land of its culture and customs. Now, imagine a young Kincaid questioning her original name of Elaine Potter Richardson, then trying to find a heritage that she can connect to, only to find that nothing is left of her history except for annotations in books on imperialism. Her voice, heritage, and identity had been stolen. All that was left was a name she couldn't quite comprehend.

I've also encountered emptiness when searching for myself in history. Echoing 'Elaine Potter Richardson,' my Chinese name of 鄭載永 implies a thousand years' worth of submission and acquiescence. In his 2019 article "Provincializing Korea" in the Dutch journal *T'oung Pao*, Yuanchong Wang characterizes the hierarchical relationship between the many ancient dynasties of China and Korea. Wang lists ancient Chinese kingdoms' centuries-long attempts to absorb the Korean peninsula. Describing the influences of these Chinese invasions, Wang uses a tone I found strangely comical, as well as the term *Sadae juŭi*. Frequently used by Korean scholars past and present, *Sadae juŭi* directly translates to 'doctrine of serving the great.' Wang explores the cultural implications of *Sadae juŭi*, which became the "target of criticism in Korea as a metaphor for humiliating subordination to a powerful alien force" (129). Wang explains that this term was roughly forged "to legitimize and consolidate the ideology *Chuch'e sasang* in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea under Kim Il-sung" and that it became the foundation of the pseudo-religious status the Kim family held for decades (130). Wang's clinical, emotionless tone as he explains *Sadae juŭi*, source of the Korean worldview's long-held inferiority and self-victimization, sparked a bitterness I recognized from Kincaid.

Under perpetual fear of impending invasion, we Koreans believe in our version of Murphy's Law: *if anything can invade, it will*. So, we resorted to a thousand-year-long submission, ensuring others would be content enough to leave us be, as a nation lacking the power to face a bigger country. This belief of a 'weaker country' lived on, expressed in multiple forms from an overworked, fatigued national sentiment to resentment toward our own country. Whether voluntary or involuntary, Wang's failure to underscore these Chinese invasions' cultural consequences on Korea recalls Kincaid's depiction of Christopher Columbus' attitude toward the preexisting narrative of the Americas: the fact that "it had a substantial existence, physical and spiritual, before he became aware of it, does not occur to him" (Kincaid 620). 鄭載永, my Chinese name, was a piece of the historical subordination of my voice. 鄭載永 reminded me of a sense of defeat.

My English name, Tony, presents a different problem of identity: not defeat and subordination, but assimilation. Yoon Je-Kyun's *Ode To My Father*, a multimillion-dollar-grossing 2014 Korean film that follows the life of a Korean man born in 1939, illustrates this problem. The film begins during the Korean War, with protagonist Deok-Su losing his sister in the Hungnam Evacuation in which the US military rescued over 10,000 Korean civilians from an impending bombing. The film follows Deok-Su through various South Korean historical milestones, from being sent off to work as a miner in West Germany to the Vietnam War. The film ends with a dream sequence: a now senile Deok-Su reunites with his late father who thanks him for "[doing] all the things that I couldn't do," leading a family through the violent tides of history (Yoon, 01:58:00 ~ 58:30). Though this film was widely popular as a tear-jerker and ode to an older generation who went through Korea's industrialization and globalization (as well as a clear *Forrest Gump* ripoff), I noticed a hidden, ineluctable hero: America. It was Americans who saved Deok-Su from the bombings of the North Korean army, Americans who strengthened West Germany in the Cold War, and American soldiers who saved Deok-Su from the Viet Cong's roaring bullets. The power that drove the film forward was neither the characters nor the Korean history, but the heroic American narrative, assimilated into the story of Korean nationhood.

History and cinema are not the only places where American assimilation has taken place in Korea. The idea of an English name is not as foreign as it sounds to the majority of Koreans, given how much the language is integrated into their culture. English is an indispensable part of Korean education; it is even a subject within the Suneung, the Korean Scholastic Aptitude Test for Colleges. English academies often require the usage of English names. Students might choose a comically over-stylized name for themselves, like Kilimajaro An to Sebastian Shim, or the academy may randomly assign a name, turning Lee Sihyun into Shawn Lee and Oh Hyunseok to Chris Oh. This anachronistic phenomenon uncomfortably resembles *Sōshi-kaimēi*, a policy that the Japanese Empire instituted in the colonization era to force Koreans to give up their

original names for Japanese. And it is amplified as the age when Korean children are expected to learn English becomes younger and younger. Colin Marshall, a writer for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* blog, tackles the absurdity of this trend via an advertisement that he saw on Korean television for English, a Korean app that creates childhood English study materials. “‘Mommy, look at me!’ shouts a little girl, holding up her sketchbook, ‘I can paint a tree!’ The mother smiles benevolently. Then daughter rises and scampers forth, arms waving: ‘I love bread and milk!’” (Marshall). Marshall also underscores the common Korean notion of English education, that “if you don’t get your child studying English while still a toddler, they’ll never make it in this world.” This obsession with English might seem like a desperate attempt to prepare the child for a globalized education, but in reality it derives from a cultural apprehension rooted in the Korean historical narrative.

The Korean obsession with English education and names alludes to a time when the fate of the people was in the hands of a power much greater than them, when the nation was divided by the likes of two superpowers, and each separate piece was forced to cling onto their side of a foreign Cold War. The obsession brings back the helplessness, the dread, and the idolization of America in Koreans’ times of need. *Ode To My Father* recalls an American Narrative from a Korean Perspective. When Deoksu asks his father to recognize that “I kept my promise . . . I’ve lived well enough,” it feels to me like a question directed to America, the true narrator of his story for the entirety of the film (Yoon, 01:57:00 ~ 01:57:30). The little girl in Colin Marshall’s article is another version of the same question. And so is the name Tony Jeong.

I have followed Kincaid’s emphasis on historical inquiry as I’ve dissected my foreign names. But what about 정재영? What am I to think and feel about my Korean name?

A few months ago, I went to the Samsung Corporation’s private gallery at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul. There, I saw pieces from the late chairman Lee Gunhee’s collection, which both commemorated his endeavor of archiving great art and reminded us who was in charge of the country. Among works from Monet to ancient sculpture, one painting caught my eye for its discordance with the pamphlet’s written description. *Kunsang* (‘People’) is a painting made in 1986 by the Korean-born French painter Yi Eungro. It shows the vibrant movement of a crowd of people, each with his or her own unique posture and action, to evoke the throbbing energy of a group. The painting may represent the protests for democracy against the Korean government in the ’80s, or the strength of Korea as a nation. But what I got from it was different. Looking at it, I felt the suffocation you feel in a crowd. I felt the pressure of being a part of something bigger than you. I felt the violence a group can have on your individuality. It is so easy to lose a sense of self if you place yourself within a grand narrative. I find that being a part of *any* cultural narrative not only

allows myself to be open to historical burdens, but also limits me inside cultural cliches and stereotypes.

Contemplating this, I understood that my initial uneasiness encountering Kincaid was not from recognition, but rather from a failure to deeply understand her bitterness and anger. I realized her words didn't echo as much in me not just because of our narratives' structural difference, but a disparity between how we perceive our narratives. My curiosity and research allowed me to understand my narrative's place in history, but I did not experience the kind of pain that Kincaid describes. Maybe it was because I had lived abroad for a few years, or maybe it was because I was brought up by parents who were too tolerant for a Korean but too authoritative for an American. I realize that my names, and my understanding of their meanings, have not dictated how I see the world.

Somewhere over the Pacific on a flight to New York, I thought about changing my English name. Just as Jamaica Kincaid sought a replacement for 'Elaine Potter' with a nom de plume from Caribbean islands, I wanted a name that would resemble the pronunciation of my Korean name: *Jaeyeong*. As I was looking through the many names that start with Ja- (Jay, Jack, Jade, Jadan, Jared, Jake, Jayce, Jacob, Jason, Jaquelin), I realized that I've always thought of my English name as something I could conveniently change at any time, even though I have been called Tony almost half of my life. This moment, in the air, it seemed that without *me*, my names were nothing: meaningless words, not historical burdens that held hundreds of years' worth of pain and suffering. It seemed I could decide what to call myself.

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