

# Thoughts on Keeping Original Names

By Ji In Lugtu

When I joined my adoptive family, Ji In was my given name, which my adoptive parents chose to change.

For the most part, I didn't question my name, and perhaps in some unexpressed sense I appreciated it. I was already under enough scrutiny as a racial minority of one in my white peer group. Maybe my American name spared me from additional ridicule.

As a child, however, I did sometimes tell my parents that I disliked my name. For a while during the first grade, I labeled my worksheets with other names I wished to try on for size. Stephanie. Kathleen. My teacher was amused. I was serious.

Names are an important, powerful and essential part of our identities. Names can carry family history. Names can begin new traditions. Names can also rouse expectations. For many intercountry and transracial adoptees, assumptions surrounding our names often precede us. I can't count how many incredulous faces I encountered throughout the years in doctors' offices and even job interviews when my name was called aloud, and I stood in reply.

In retrospect, I think it wasn't my particular name that I took issue with as a child. It was the sense of incongruity I felt in having a face that didn't "match" my name, and in having to confront the reality of inheriting a legacy of not belonging. Although I may have been too young to define these struggles, I was already ensconced in them, by nature of being a transracially adopted child of color in a white community.

When at last I started exploring my Korean heritage as an adult, my feelings about my name reflected the change I sensed in my identity. I began to feel doubled: two histories, two families, two names.

Seven years ago, when I reunited with my Korean family,

it became clear that "Ji In" had not come from my Korean parents and was likely given to me by an agency worker. Still, it remained attached to me in a visceral way, bonded to the infant who went from maternity hospital to adoption agency to foster family to the United States, where that name was replaced.

I felt that bond to my Korean name surge when I sat in a room for the first time with my three Korean sisters, whose names complemented one another's as harmonies in a single musical chord, while mine rang dissonant — jarring but full of truth. Our family history, like my name, like our lives, had been changed by adoption.

My decision to legally reclaim my Korean name four years ago wasn't a rejection of my American parents' choice to change my name. Rather, it was a way for me to recognize that my history goes deeper than my Americanization. I found that I couldn't lay retroactive blame upon my parents for the decision they made in 1976. Instead, using what I grew to learn about adoption, family, culture and race, I renegotiated an identity for myself in the present. Reinstating my Korean name was a gift I gave myself to acknowledge my complex journey, and a way of owning a piece of my history from which I had long been estranged.

Today I bristle at the idea that adopted infants come as "clean slates" or that older children's identities can be written over in the name of a "fresh start." Does this imply that who and where we came from are somehow less significant than our post-adoption identities?

Adoptive parents today have resources available to help them make decisions that honor their children's histories and identities, reflecting a different understanding of heritage than what was recognized in past decades.

As adoptees, we each inherit a complex legacy, and how we grow to identify ourselves is as unique as our names.



**Ji In Lugtu was born in South Korea and adopted to the United States in 1976. She and her husband live on the island of Oahu, where Ji In works as a freelance writer and editor. Her daughter, Olivia, was born in April. Our Reflections is the viewpoint of selected adoptees. If you would like to pose a question to the Reflections panel, write to Adoption TODAY magazine at 541 E. Garden Dr. Unit N • Windsor, CO 80550; or e-mail to [louis@adoptinfo.net](mailto:louis@adoptinfo.net).**

# What are your thoughts on changing versus keeping an adopted child's original name?

**Lynelle Ung-Thanh Beveridge, 35, is a Vietnamese adoptee raised in Australia. Lynelle is founder and director of the Inter-Country Adoptee Support Network (ICASN, [www.icasn.org](http://www.icasn.org)) and acts as adoptee representative to the Australian Federal Government on the National Intercountry Adoption Advisory Group.**



The topic of whether or not to change an adopted child's name is a deeply personal and contentious issue. Years ago, in the times when I was adopted, I understand many adoptive parents changed their adopted child's name for purposes of making it easier to pronounce in a culture where the original name was not common.

This seems to have changed in today's era where many Australian prospective parents receive extensive pre-adoption education and have come to understand how significant the cultural links are to a child's heritage. If a child's name is changed today, it seems to be similar to any biological parents welcoming a new child into their family, whereby the name is given to reflect a special meaning of the child becoming a part of their family — like a rite of passage.

More than 30 years ago, my adoptive family gave me an Anglo-Saxon name because they couldn't pronounce my original Vietnamese name. They thought people would find it difficult to pronounce, which is true in experience — the spelling does not reflect the correct pronunciation at all.

In fact, I pronounced it incorrectly most of my life until I was in my mid-20s and met other Vietnamese people who told me how it was meant to be pronounced.

My adoptive family was also focused on helping me to “fit in,” as Australia had only just moved out of the “White Australia policy” days. My adoptive family did keep my Vietnamese name as my middle name and gave me the choice when I was a teenager on whether to keep my Australian name as my first, to swap it around, or change it completely. I chose to keep my name as they gave me, as I still do to this day even though I have married and could choose to carry my married name.

So 35 years plus onward, if I were to adopt a child today, would I keep his or her original name? First, I would have to say I think times have changed and it's almost in vogue now to have an unusual or culturally different name. This helps in my decision, and I would almost certainly keep a child's original name mainly because I believe it helps the child to feel a sense of pride in his or her first heritage and culture.

In having my Vietnamese name as a second name, it did influence me to grow up believing that my Vietnamese heritage and culture was second to my Australian adopted one. I'm sure this was not entirely due to just the naming aspect of my upbringing, but many other factors played a role. However, the fact that my adoptive parents never took the time to learn or remember how to pronounce my name correctly gave me an underlying message that it wasn't important.

To the contrary! I recall reading the letters that were written to my adoptive parents prior to my adoption where they make reference to my original name, what it means in Vietnamese, and who gave it to me — and I was astounded that my parents never realized the significance of what that meant. To know that somebody had named me, most likely my birth mother as the letter stated, was the first time I felt I must have belonged to somebody who was a piece of me. How had they failed to convey such a significant piece of information about my beginnings?

I understand now that the answer to this was, in that day and time, the adoption organization's motto was “raise the child as your own” and everything would be OK. There was a lack of understanding the significance of any bits of knowledge about the child's history prior to being adopted and how all these pieces help to make up the puzzle of who we are as adoptees as we grow into adulthood. There was little knowledge about the importance of raising children culturally aware and proud of their heritage, as there is today.

In my 10 years of being heavily involved in the intercountry adop-

tion community worldwide, I would now also say that from my adoptee perspective, changing a child's name seems to reflect the "entitlement" attitude that some have toward gaining a child via intercountry adoption. It's almost like a child has become another couple's possession, and so they want to remove any specks of original history or identity that were given by the first parents or caregivers.

I see this reported a lot in high-profile celebrity adopters, and it irks me how this adds to the lack of education about the impact adoption has on everyone involved and carries with it a lack of respect for the child's identity before joining his or her new family and culture.

I'm sure this viewpoint is contentious, but I think we need to remember that children do not "belong" to anyone, and as adoptees, our lives have already been so traumatized in losing all that we know, which despite the obvious gains we achieve via adoption, surely we can be allowed to hold onto some pieces of ourselves which were ours prior to being adopted — our original names.

Sometimes our original name can be the only piece of information we know about ourselves prior to being adopted. I think my adoptive parents were wise in giving me a choice when I was old enough to understand — it helped me to see they understood the significance of my heritage but at the same time, were trying to balance that with helping me to fit into my new adopted culture and country.

***Pushpa Duncklee, 47, has a business called Beaches Boot Camp, teaching group fitness classes outdoors. She writes on her blog and is also currently working on an adoption documentary. Pushpa is married with one daughter, a family in India, and her adoptive family in Oregon.***



My name is the one fragment of me that is still intact from prior to my adoption. The journey from India, the life with strangers as family, the cultural changes I adjusted to, the absence from my culture and the loss of my mother and family wreaked havoc with my psyche but not with my name. It is the only thing no one has taken away from me, unlike my culture and family.

I have had a lifetime of love and hate with my name. I cried and felt rejected when I was teased and called "Push Me Pull You" as a child. I swallowed years of anger at people who could not pronounce it correctly after several times of spelling it for them slowly. Enunciating every letter and having to say, "P as in Paul, U, S, H, P as in Paul, and A," like a first-grade school teacher to get people to know clearly what I was saying, became frustrating and aggravating.

Every experience with my name shaped my opinions of others. They show their ignorance or closed mindedness and lack of respect by their simple hesitated responses to my name and lack of interest in even repeating it because of their fear of saying something out of their comfort zone. Even teachers during roll call would ignore my first name and only call my last name, leaving me to feel less important than the other children.

Yet this is who I am — the one thing that is a reminder of where I came from, who I was — and one piece of me that has not changed regardless of socioeconomic changes, cultural environment, or who was playing the role of parent to me.

Soon after my adoption at 6 years of age, my adoptive mother told my adoptive father, "Let's change Pushpa's name to Sarah, after my grandmother." I cringed and my father replied confidently with, "No, she needs something from her life before us."

Now I cannot even imagine myself with any other name. Who would I be with a name like Sarah? I know I would have felt even less connected to my ethnicity. This has been the one strand left of the umbilicus with my mother and my mother country, connecting me eternally to both.

Recently, I polled people on my blog and also verbally to see what people think of adoptees having their name changed, and the majority voted with keeping the original name. Some Indians I know who immigrated here use American names only to make their lives easier. One friend went from Ashoka to Mike. Either name conjures up a different image of the same person.

This is not something I feel that I can judge or say that all people should keep their name of ethnic origin, but I only know that for me, it has been a challenge to have an unusual name that I must

explain constantly. But it is also the name that resonates with my soul and goes all the way back to India to my origins. I am thankful for my dad in speaking up and standing up for me.

**Juan H. Heath, 34, was born in Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico, and adopted at the age of 3 months. In 2000, he moved to Florida to work for a newspaper and to find people who looked like him. He returned to Kansas in 2004 and was surprised to find a lot of people who looked like him.**



My name is Juan. That doesn't usually illicit much of a response, as I am obviously Latino, but when I combine it with my last name, Heath, it always raises more than a few eyebrows.

I was born in Mexico and came to be adopted by a couple in the Midwest. My adopted father's stepfather's stepmother was a nurse in the hospital where I was born; she is my adopted step-step-great-grandmother, and also Mexican.

Although my birth name was Jose, which is Spanish for Joseph, my adoptive parents changed my name to honor both of my adopted grandfathers, John and Harold. But to preserve the connection to my ethnic heritage, they used a translation for my first name.

My parents and grandparents always encouraged an interest in my birth culture. They would make a point of going to the Mexican areas of Kansas City to stores and shops and attending annual festivals. This eventually would lead to me writing a paper in grade school about Mexico for a class project, and ultimately my choice of college degree, Latin-American history.

Some friends of my parents, who accompanied them to Mexico to serve as translators, were a presence in my youth and they remain friends with our family still today. Despite this, there was one aspect of my development that was neglected — language. These were

in the days long before “Dora the Explorer,” Univision and ESPN Deportes.

Having an ethnic name was a particular challenge because everyone assumed that I spoke Spanish. This was especially a problem in college when I took formal language classes. When I walked into the room, everyone would automatically think that I was the instructor — until I opened my mouth.

After college, I moved to Florida for a few years. This was also an adventure because the moment I introduced myself as Juan, any Latino would immediately launch into a rapid-fire dialogue in Espanol, with me imploring them to “Wait, wait! Espera, espera!”

I am proficient in Spanish, which means I know just enough to get myself into trouble.

My family's decision to give me a name from my heritage was important enough to influence me to negotiate the names of future children with my eventual spouse before we were even married. In fact, my daughter is named Maria Lynn, which is taken from my mother's middle name, Marie, and my wife's late mother's middle name, Lynn.

I was inspired to incorporate and adapt family names, just as my own had been. Other potential names were Anna Kathleen, from our grandmothers, and Gloria or Esperanza, the Spanish word for “hope.” I figured if I had four daughters, I would need all the hope I could get.

Our second child was a boy, and I really wanted to name him Diego (Spanish for James, after a deceased friend), or Oscar or Victor. Lucas (Luke) was also in consideration, but my wife did not care for any of those choices. Instead he was named Damon, of Greek origin, after another deceased friend of ours.

Although my name has presented me with many challenges, I believe that my development was influenced positively by the decision to choose something reflecting my birth culture. Growing up in a time and place in rural Kansas that was primarily Anglo, it always made me mindful of my cultural heritage.

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