

Names and Tags By Prof Chee Yam Cheng

A name is yours to upkeep, to protect and to be proud of. You are you because of the name you bear. It is your unique inheritance.

All of us have a name – given to us from birth and duly registered on our birth certificates. In addition, some have other names added later on in life. Whatever our names, our parents or grandparents gave them to us to identify us, to separate us from our neighbours. Much thought may have gone into it to choose a suitable name. For the Chinese, the name has a meaning and it would not be wrong to suggest that whoever gave us that name had hopes that we would live up to that name. For the English educated, English names are given with the hope that that child will emulate past great people in history. Likewise for the Malays and the Indians. Their religion and culture would have heroes and heroines worth emulating.

"A good name is better than precious ointment;...." Ecclesiastes 7:1

"A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold." Proverbs 22:1

These two quotations encourage us to keep our good name untainted and unblemished for its worth far outweighs precious things and precious metals. Or you may not agree as many in the past have disagreed and become infamous characters. In Singapore, we could change our names but with some difficulty, or add an alias or two if we were not satisfied with our names. The older generation of Chinese parents used to call their children simply after animals of the farmyard but that was not relished by their children, who in later years found that being called a dog had its disadvantages and unacceptable implications. The alias is a recognised and a registered name. It also appears on the identity card and the name is rightfully yours. You should do all within your power to keep that name pure.

Nicknames also exist. These usually do not appear on the official certificates or identity cards. But for ease of remembrance, for use of work and social acquaintances, they may do. But trying to identify the person officially by his nickname would be impossible. It would not be recognised. Many a time, we may know a distant relative by his or her nickname, but once hospitalised for instance, you cannot trace him or her knowing only the nickname. It is not official and so cannot be on record.

Thus far, I have tried to explain the usefulness of a name, the aspirations of the name-giver who gave you your name, and the limited use of nicknames. A name is yours to upkeep, to protect and to be proud of. You are you because of the name you bear. It is your unique inheritance. Even identical twins cannot have the same name.

For the Chinese population, in the past, their names other than the surname was a phonetic translation into English of Chinese characters pronounced in Mandarin or one of the dialects. That was not always accurate because Chinese is a musical language with intonations. Today, things are more standardised – *Hanyu Pinyin* is here to stay and translating these Chinese characters into the English sounds is easier. But pronouncing the English version of the Chinese name in English may not be always correct. Reading Chinese characters spelt out in the English alphabet has its own rules regarding pronunciation.

Recently in the press, there was a letter from a parent who made a plea that official names be used rather than the unofficial *Hanyu Pinyin* version. By official, (s)he meant that which

appears on the birth certificate. His (her) child was given a name with an unofficial name (*Hanyu Pinyin*) which also appeared on the school register and may appear on official certificates. "There will be a lot of confusion and trauma in the future if the name on educational certificates does not tally with that on the birth certificate or identity card", (s)he wrote. At the Registry of Births today, a Chinese child's Chinese name is translated into the English language in a standardised *Hanyu Pinyin* way. But there has been a lag phase between the time *Hanyu Pinyin* gained official acceptance and the time when the Registry implemented this procedure. Should not the authorities allow those without official *Hanyu Pinyin* names to omit them in their official certificates? A child must know who he is and if his name serves to confuse him, that confusion should be resolved immediately.

Walking along the street, nobody will know you if they have not known you before. You are incognito and as a private citizen, you are entitled to that right of privacy. However, it is now the fashion to wear nametags. Assuming that the above problem is solved, the nametag should have your official name. And this is so in government service. For the private sector, this may not be so. The reason I can offer is it is easier for others to remember a short nice common name rather than your Chinese name, which sounds most foreign to the foreigners and tourists. So hotels have a string of *Jasmines*, *James* and the like – nicknames if you like. Sometimes if there are two or more of such a namesake, then the surname is added onto the nametag to distinguish one from the other. But outside the hotel,

..... nametags and identity, are but a part of the feedback loop. They serve to make easier the process of feedback by facilitating mention of a specific instance, a particular person.....

nobody knows who James is. In school, he was not called James at all; neither at home. But to the hotel management, such nametags have served their purpose. What purpose?

I make the assumption that once you can be identified from a mass of like people, e.g. waiter *James Tan* amongst a hundred other waiters in a big hotel, management believes that such positive identification will positively affect the work performance of each of its staff. None of us inherently wants to attract uncomplimentary or adverse remarks and complaints. With a nametag over our breasts, we tend to be more self-conscious of our words and deeds. It also helps us to consider our words and ways. It also makes it easier for people to compliment or complain about us. The threshold to either action by the public is lowered because the job is made simple once the person can be identified. So it seems, nametags when worn by staff would immediately enhance service and increase productivity. Each of us has a degree of self-esteem and self-pride. Our nametags help us to enhance those virtues.

The reverse situation then becomes quite obvious. Poor service, lack of courtesy, a could-not-care-less attitude could be shown, but how can the public complain? It does not even know the name of that employee. On the contrary, for good service – how to compliment? The public does not even know the name of that courteous staff. So with no positive feedback, staff performing well may not get the encouragement they need to continue doing well and with no negative feedback, undisciplined staff continue to get away with slipshod work. Worse still, the technique of blanket blame can be most discouraging. When failing to isolate the culprit, everyone shares the blame. Collective blame is most demeaning to those

who do not deserve it.

In the civil service, nametags are in. And the name on the tag is the official name. Nicknames are not allowed. But the idea behind nametags is the same. You must take responsibility for your words, actions and attitudes. Because you can be easily identified, you will think twice, maybe thrice, about some devious or mischievous behaviour. Self-esteem within each of us leads us more often than not to uphold our good name rather than to tarnish them. For those who have an office, the name need not be on a tag over a breast. It could be on the door. The purpose is the same.

All right, so the plus points of name tagging are now obvious. What does the authority in charge do should the anonymous public need complaining against? In situations where public servants interact with the public, there must arise situations when the public is wrong, is unreasonable, is rude and impatient. What recourse to justice has the named public servant who weekly stands in the firing line of verbal bullets meant to kill if they could? And if a public servant is wrongly complained against, where does the letter of complaint go? For how long is it filed? And in whose files and for what purpose? Many a time, complaints against public employees appear in the press and are even highlighted without giving the public at large the other side of the picture. Should not a responsible press present both sides of a story on the same page on the same day, rather than delay the reply for a week or two? What is the impact created? The public is always right and the public servant always wrong or what? With both sides of the story together, the public at large can then draw its own conclusions.

Another point I'd like to bring up is what do the authorities do with justified complaints? You have identified

yourself as the complainant. You have identified the substandard public servant. What then happens? Nothing much? You could try to appeal to the good senses of the public servant. Perhaps he or she would mend his or her ways. But if he or she does not? Should the public continue to suffer?

As an example, if a teacher loses a student's workbook, but insists the student lost it and puts him to shame, then the book surfaces a week later and the teacher realises she has misplaced it somewhere, can the damage done to the child be repaired? What more if the child's parents, believing the teacher (as should be the case so as not to undermine the teacher's authority in class), punish the child some more at home? And now the child maintains his innocence and insinuates that his parents would rather believe his teacher than their own child. What does the Ministry do if a complaint were received? If it does nothing (as is most likely the case), the teacher may then continue to unfairly and subtly punish the child. Would such trauma to a child's mind be tolerated if he were your own child?

To finish off a long story, nametags and identity, are but a part of the feedback loop. They serve to make easier the process of feedback by facilitating mention of a specific instance, a particular person and does away with generalisations. You can compliment or you can complain and be particular about the whole business. There should be no ambiguity. The next step is that such feedback must lead to remedial action. Things must change for the better. The one complained against should be told and his or her side of the incident recorded. Compliments should be passed on to encourage ascent to higher planes of good work. If all these links in the feedback chain do not materialise, then the whole exercise of nametags to identify the good and the bad has no meaning. ■