

Reflexive essay

## **A Situational Timeline of the Names I Go By**

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This item has been published in Issue 07 'To Be—Named: Across Borders,' edited by Jesse van Amelsvoort, Gwyneira Isaac, and Tomasz Wicherkiewicz.

To cite this item: Chin, J. (2026). A situational timeline of the names I go by. *The February Journal*, 07, 37–49. DOI: 10.60633/tfj.i07.142

To link this item: <https://doi.org/10.60633/tfj.i07.142>

Published: 28 September 2026

ISSN-2940-5181

[thefebuaryjournal.org](http://thefebuaryjournal.org)

Berlin, Berlin Universities Publishing

## A Situational Timeline of the Names I Go By

Joey Chin

This reflexive essay traces the changing meanings attached to names across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Through a personal and chronological account, it examines how names can carry assumptions about gender, family, culture, identity, and belonging. Moving across different linguistic and cultural contexts, the essay reflects on experiences of being named, renamed, misnamed, and addressed through different versions of the self.

**Keywords:** Hong Kong, names, personal names, childhood, adolescence, identity, adulthood, autofiction

### Before birth | Year of the Tiger

My parents had a variety of considerations for an English name for me:

- *Priscilla* seems difficult to learn and to spell
- The front desk receptionist has an interesting name, Joey, and it seems pretty enough
- It begins with J, is four letters long, just like my sister's

I often wondered what qualifying factors mattered more. Trends? The ease of spelling, for them and me? Or was the lack of creativity due to convenience and sheer laziness?

### Birth | Year of the Tiger

I am given the name 'Chén Língmín' | 'Chin Ling Min,' 'Joey'

### Chinese lessons | 1993–1998

I have lost count of how many Lings I know. Ling, Lingling, somethingLing (Peiling) or Lingsomething (me)—it is the same with Chinese female personalities on TV.

As soon as I learned to read, I noticed the difference in how the characters in my name, 'Chen' and 'Ling,' were written. With such common characters, it was not hard to find another person's name to match against these. Surely it was not a cause for alarm and only as grave as the difference between 'Jo' and 'Joe.'

Early into the school year when I was 8, my Chinese teacher took a look at my workbook and said: 'Why is your name in traditional Chinese?' It might have been asked with curiosity, even tenderness, because that was the sort of teacher he was: a portly middle-aged man with delicate penmanship and an almost girlish laughter.

I was shy and embarrassed without even understanding his question. He had used the word 'traditional.' That must mean old-fashioned. On top of that, what did 'traditional Chinese' even mean? I remembered the countless times my father had told us with an overbearing air of superiority, often much to my mother's annoyance, 'Your grandfather was born in China.' That seemed like a possible answer. I could have said it—but it would have been without my father's conviction.

Later, to be safe, I would change how my name was written. With these updated characters, I would surely be cool and hip, at least like everyone else.

I was so used to the simplified characters of my name that before examinations, I needed to remind myself to pen my name in the same script I was registered with.

### **Birth | Year of the Goat**

Example of a binary opposition I: I had not known what being a girl or what being another daughter for my parents meant until the day my brother was born. Then I understood that my being in the family was not defined by whoever I had become in the eight long years of my life, but by existing in relation to my brother—more specifically, my parents' son.

Example of binary opposition II: Who both my brother and I could become after his birth would be continuously negotiated, shaped, and changed by his arrival.

### **Hong Kong | 1997**

Hong Kong is an aggressive and dizzying chaos of frenetic lights, sound, traffic, and people who walk and speak, and then disappear into the next scene of another cinematic alley all too quickly.

I decide Hong Kong is not a fun destination for a family holiday, but it is evidently different for adults—my parents, who are happy to drag us from one market of wares in shouting colors to another market of shouting vendors.

To withdraw from this spinning city, I wanted to return into myself with a storybook, but I don't have one. Instead, the only book in the hotel room is what my father has bought for my mother at the airport. It has a red cover with Chinese icons and a distinctive wawa in the middle, and, of course, he has bought it so my mother will gain more knowledge about China. And, of course, she is not interested.

The book, *China Wakes*, is thick, the words are small, but they are not complex. I can read them, know what they mean, but, even when I piece them together, I barely understand what the book is about.

The is now missing, but I found out later that it was *China Wakes: The Struggle for the Soul of a Rising Power* written in 1994 by husband-wife authors, Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn.

I was unaware of its sociopolitical commentary, naturally, and it mattered little because, as a first interesting thing for me, there is an image of a happy young boy with a plastic bag. The caption says he is Tibetan and is seeing a plastic bag for the first time. There are pages after pages on Tiananmen, Taiwan, Japan, Nanjing, the Beijing Olympics. I skip all that, including paragraphs with words like 'vagina,' 'breasts,' and 'gouged eyes,' looking for a section I can understand.

When I finally do—because it is so hard to find—it is a paragraph on how girls born to families without sons are given variations of names to mean 'bring a brother'—like *laidi* or *zhaodi*.

I am aghast at how direct these names are. A boy word in a girl's name? They are so literal that they sound ugly, like names out of a Saturday morning cartoon, and cannot be real.

## **Tigress | 2002–2007**

I don't know what my mother can't stand more: my teenage hell-raising behavior, my hell-raising behavior that she suspects stems from a lousy Chinese name, or maybe just me.

Sometimes, she suggests it could well be my father's fault. My name was likely agreed upon after a suggestion by some half-baked literomancer or a subpar professional he had consulted at my birth.

Cosmology plays a significant role in Chinese naming practices. The tiger symbolizes strength, bravery, independence, and pride—all desirable for a boy, but parents with a daughter under the same Chinese zodiac had to be careful.

My mother is worried about me being wild, headstrong, cunning: the worst traits in a tiger extrapolated onto a woman. She would cite it as a reason for my undesirable behavior: body piercings, smoking, dalliances with the opposite sex, quick retorts, and a short temper. In that case, surely half the population of teenage girls would be a tiger. She would say of my darling, 'Because you are a tigress,' as if my zodiac sign explained everything, 'you don't know death.' (In Hokkien, 'tigress' also means 'bold' or 'audacious.') The 'Ling' in my name comprises the character for 'mountain.' It even looks like one, a mountain range with the peak in the middle and a base at the bottom. That is the cause of our difficult relationship and all the problems with me. It was unfathomable that a tiger, clearly wild and on the loose, should have a mountain to escape to, to roam free.

Like explorers who view nature as something to be conquered, my mother saw that a tiger should be tamed.

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In a typical school year, my performance in the Chinese language would start off as passable, even above average, with the energy and promise of a new beginning. Soon, the fervor would lose its shine and wear off with lethargy, returning to its actual standards: poor. By midyear, I would have barely scraped through.

Descending from mediocrity to failure, the name 'Lingmin' was tagged to lack of hard work, laziness, and an inability to apply myself.

Even with more time labored into writing, memorizing, and summoning the characters from books and newspapers to identify themselves to me, the feedback more or less was the same: urgent attention needed, room for improvement, potential to do better.

My name 'Lingming' in this context felt threatening because it was sometimes followed by a call to my parents: my mother's Chinese was hopeless, but the severity and shame in a teacher's complaint she felt and understood perfectly. And that embarrassment, she was able to report to my father and, to put it mildly, nothing pleasant came out of that.

'Lingmin, Lingmin, Lingmin!'

A name that started in the registrar, lived and ended in the years of Chinese lessons.

## Chinese lessons II | n.d.

A classmate decided to give me another Chinese name. For the rest of the year, I was *Zu'er Chen Lingmin* to her because she thought it would funny or to translate Joey into Chinese.

## Party I | n.d.

A guy jested once: 'Is your surname Tribbiani?' I had never watched F.R.I.E.N.D.S, and, naturally, the pop culture reference was lost on me. Although after that, I wondered about the famous sitcom's impact on the name Joey, and if it was considered a male moniker.

## GAP Girl | 2006/2007

I was looking for a part-time job during my school holidays when a GAP opened nearby. I applied as a retail assistant and quickly got it.

My friends were already working after school in clothing stores like Topshop and Giordano. It was a popular causal job for teenagers, with easy tasks, decent hourly rates, flexible hours, and convenient locations around town. After school, one could start the shift on Friday afternoon, finish by 10 pm, grab something to eat, and head off to a club or a bar. Wake up at midday on Saturday, stumble to work at 4 pm, and repeat.

My new workplace had a specific image to uphold, which we adhered to in accordance with the guidelines set by a fashionable and intimidating visual merchandiser.

'Branding,' she called it.

Only popular wholesome American music played over the store's speakers, so the Placebo and Muse CDs that I and another Brit-rock fan brought to the store were in vain. Most people who worked there were young. Such as students like me, guys waiting to enlist into the army, and fresh graduates still looking for something more permanent.

We all wore slouchy cotton T-shirts that said 'GAP SINGAPORE.' A heavy magnetic nametag was attached to the left side of our uniform—the sort that came with a pacemaker warning—which caused the thin shirt to sag with weight.

Expectedly, mine read 'Joey.'

Unexpectedly, so did the nametags of three others.

All guys in fact: spunky, goofy, good looking. Maybe it had to do with the namesake. They weren't friends before but bonded like they were part of a fraternity called Joey. They tried to pick the same shifts, headed out together for their breaks with one another whenever possible, as they 'went up for air,' which is what they called smoking.

There was never any confusion between me and the others. I was Girl Joey, and the rest—they were left to sort it out amongst themselves. Over the announcement system, they would be identified with the initial of their surname. 'Will Joey L. come to the counter, please.'

## The workforce | 2007

Referred to as:

- Zoe (!)
- *Miss Joey*—as a surname pronounced *Jwuy*
- *Mr Joey*—as a given name
- *Joye*
- *Joe/Jo*
- *Joyce/Joys*
- *Joy*

Oh, joy!

## Party II | 2008

'Surely Joey can't be your real name. We call my brother Joey but it's actually Joseph,' someone remarked skeptically. Not the politest thing to say upon meeting a person for the first time, even if it was just at a party.

His lack of social graces I cast aside very quickly because, for the first time, I worried about the abbreviation, the truncation of my name, its veracity. And in turn, *me*.

## Reading Perimmons (1986) | 2011

Before taking serious notice of the hyphen in the Chinese-American poet Li-Young Lee's name, I was confused about which was his surname and which was his given name, its order held both oral and aural possibilities for me (like Ang Lee and Lee Ang).

In *Persimmons*, collected in *Rose* (Lee, 1986, p17), he writes:

'In sixth grade Mrs. Walker  
slapped the back of my head  
and made me stand in the corner  
for not knowing the difference between *persimmon* and *precision*.  
How to choose  
  
persimmons. This is precision.'

To be sure, I looked for his Chinese name, 'Li Liyang,' and found the alliteration so mellifluous that I could never forget it again. In that order, now, this is precision.

## Singapore/Hong Kong | Year of the Snake

My boyfriend is bringing me for the first time to meet his parents. We have just ushered in the Year of the Snake. Chinese New Year is over, so this visit isn't that serious, but *serious enough*.

They are from Malaysia but moved to Singapore when the postcolonial difference did not matter. They speak Mandarin, some Malay, and understand English, although this is not what they converse in.

'This is Lingmin,' is how he introduces me in Mandarin.

My surprise surpasses nervousness. He had never referred to me as Lingmin before, and no one had used that name outside of Chinese class.

There is a sense of dissociation: it is erotic and exotic coming out of his lips, but at the same time far removed. It is like listening to a public announcement calling out for a lost child that is not yours.

I watch his mother look at me from head to toe. Her expression does not say anything. She could be surprised, even pleased, or already critical. I could not tell.

Later, I will find out what it means, but for now, it is this: her firstborn, her only son standing with me at the border of her living room before the kitchen where she is, repeating, 'Lingmin.'

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The sopping humidity in Hong Kong, where I am, working towards an MFA in poetry, has an unkind way of withering anything in its path.

It softens crisps, punctures gassy drinks, clings to cigarettes, sags the hair, and saps one's energy. Even more unbearable are post-lunch lectures or writing workshops: it can be soggy from a heavy meal and the weather. Sometimes, people leave the class in tears. A classmate once cried, 'If there is no value in the work, let's not pretend there is any.'

But there are worse things than tears: it turns out that my boyfriend has been cheating on me in my absence.

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Shaming needs no privacy, so when I confront him in front of his family, his mother tells me informatively, 'Oh, *her*. But Lingmin, they're just friends. She came over for dinner and that's it.' He had brought her home and introduced her, too, by her Chinese name. I am awestruck at this orchestra of collusion. So amazed am I that I want to give a rousing applause.

The creative writing I am working on has nothing on my rage or the absurdity of the situation. There are no words that can ameliorate or describe how thick I am with viciousness. My own violence scares me.

At that point, I have little consideration of karmic consequences. I only know how deeply interested I am in hurting him or causing irrevocable havoc in his life.

But I don't know how.

Instead, I gather all the breath in my lungs, whatever that is left in my mouth sour and dry with anger, and spit at him.

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Of course I don't know how.

The tigress in me is as real as a metaphor.

I truly think the worst of him, of his mother, who thinks the world of him, so to hell with them and to hell with his simpering *Lingmin! Lingmin! Lingmin*-calling family.

It is the first time I have ever thought of my own name as being sullied. Did I give rise to that? It is a word I need to reclaim, to remove from his house, outside of the situation of Chinese lessons, and to make it my own, even if it is only in words.

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*Year of the Tiger (2019) | 2015*

‘齡’: *evasive like the note of a wind-chime,  
sky-hearted tigress eloping to the mountain  
in your name, you come and go as you wish.*

She watched me evolve into the birth of name  
and zodiac spirit, scaling the luring sierra,  
lost me mid-circuit in wildlife,  
then saw me reach the summit where among the welcome  
of *lings* in mountain chimes, I roared to reply.<sup>1</sup>

**Watching *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World 2* (1989) | 2021**

The three installments of the Hong Kong comedy, *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*, were released between 1987 and 1992 on cable television, but now they have made their way to Netflix. It stars the late comedian Feifei. She plays the role of a housewife and a mother to three daughters of various ages: a young working adult, a teenager, and a primary school-going girl.

Old films on Netflix always seem *more*—like themselves but better: the colors look like they have been dressed through an Instagram filter, the audio is sharper, and the subtitles, be it in English or Chinese, more grammatically accurate. Watching it again, I noticed what I hadn't before, and that was how the daughters were addressed by family, neighbors, and—amongst themselves—as sisters.

The moving images of these episodes reify what I only read about in *China Wakes* as a child: girls whose names, formal or informal, mean 'bring a brother.' Watching these sassy, clever, and witty female characters referred to by their parents' aspirations for a son, I remember what I thought as a 12-year-old (now 34-year-old).

It is the peculiar cruelty of names, and the quiet insistence of cultural expectations that follows them.



Figure 1. A still from the movie 富貴逼人 (It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World, 1989), showing a subtitle that says 'Daidi is playing cool.' © All rights reserved.



Figure 2. A still from the movie 富貴逼人 (It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World, 1989), showing a subtitle that says 'Laidi is looking more and more pretty.' © All rights reserved.



Figure 1. A still from the movie 富貴逼人 (It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World, 1989), showing a subtitle that says 'Zhao Di, where's the iron?' © All rights reserved.

## Tinos, Greece | 2021

The message from my partner's mother came a few minutes after I woke up and was still in bed with the fog of sleep in my eyes. It is a short one and in Greek—nothing surprising, as that is what she texts me in occasionally.

The exact message went like this: 'Καλημέρα! Στην εκκλησια μη πάτε με σορτς, ειδικα η Χ.'

My understanding went as far as 'Good morning! In church do not wear \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_.'

Still sluggish from another late night of Greek summer dinners, coupled with plenty of room for improvement of the language, I did not get the last four words, including 'X.'

Maybe it was X, short for 'kiss,' the way my friends sign off in an email or text, although I know that the Greek 'X' is not same as the English 'X'. I was doubtful of the indexical kiss, judging by how this particular 'X' had a feminine article tagged to it.

I rubbed my eyes before copying the text into Google Translate. The results were: 'Good morning! In church do not wear shorts, especially X.'

Of course, 'σορτς' is simply 'shorts,' similar to how it is pronounced in English. How could I not have known? And 'ειδικα' means 'especially.' Good. A new word with practical purposes. The mystery almost solved.

But 'X'?

Ah. Of course.

'X' was me.

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Have you ever picked up a call and, not expecting that person to call (or before the years of Caller ID), not been able to make out the voice that in reality belonged to someone you know?

Or perhaps you did not recognize the familiar face of a friend who coincidentally lived on the same street as you—simply because you weren't looking for her.

That is the closest analogy I can find for the strange familiarity I felt when reading my partner's mother's text. That surprise which comes after detachment in a scenario of familiarity.

A few things all at once.

Firstly, the intended recipient of the message was likely to be my partner. A gentle reminder for us to dress respectfully for church, perhaps even more so for me, a foreign woman whose backpack staples in the summer were mostly shorts and tank tops.

Secondly, I had forgotten about how his mother uses initials in text messages. 'R' (P) for him, 'Y' (Γ) for his dad, and so on. And 'X' for 'Xapá,' me.

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My partner's parents speak perfect English, having completed their PhDs and lived in the United Kingdom for almost two decades. They have no problem pronouncing my name, but even in Greek, they chose to use not 'Joey' but 'Xapá' (pronounced 'Hara'), which means 'Joy.'

At the end of the day, perhaps it is Joy that prevails.

Something in which I have started to believe since I became Xapá.

1. This is an excerpt from a poem previously published in *New Landscapes Anthology* (Burdon and Khaymaz, 2019). The *Ling* character used in the original poem is not supported by standard computer fonts, so the version displayed here is technically inaccurate.

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### **Author's bio**

Joey Chin is an artist and writer. Her work is at the intersections of text, narrative and visual art, staged through language, poetry, acts and modes of reading, and various disruptions. Her key focus is in the development of personal communications between the self, markings of territoriality, and the inner conversations between the two.

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