

Precious Jade

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It begins with a question: “What’s your name?”

“Teresa.” I instinctively leave it at that. Everything is fine, until—

“Your last name?”

Darn. “Uh...Xu,” but I pronounce it as “zoo,” the Western whitewashed version. My Chinese last name, 徐, sounds more like “shoe,” but my dad told me that the Western way uses a “xylophone”-esque “z” sound. I’ve been relying on that since kindergarten. Which means, much to my own shame, I am always choosing one culture over another.

But at least I still say my last name. As for my middle name...

Not 1/2 but 2/3 of my name is Chinese, not European, in origin: Teresa *Yao Xu*. But given that middle names on registration forms are always optional—no asterisk of necessity—I just ignore my middle name altogether. I never even say my middle name out loud, and barely anyone knows it exists...even though I love it.

Every time I say Teresa Zoo, every time I don’t fill in my middle name, the precious jade shatters a little more.

“*Yáo* means ‘jade’, but not just jade: ‘*precious* jade.’ It’s better than jade—it’s the best jade. It’s priceless.”

I turned my wrist over, admiring how the jade bracelet glistened in the light. It felt nice and cool to the touch—almost cold, but not quite. Muted, gentle greens. Different shades of light green, all blending into each other like clouds. Beautiful.

Precious jade. Not *yù*, the usual word for jade, but *yáo*. Something more beautiful and special and unique than the very bracelet I was wearing, more meaningful than a precious stone that already holds all those qualities. Yet I wouldn’t be able to identify the actual Chinese character for *yáo* if it was the only character on a page—I can’t read or write Mandarin. And I’ve never heard my name used to refer to jade—I’ve only heard *yù*. It’s a hidden gem. Hidden, like my complex cultural identity. So hidden that *I* can’t even recognize it.

Yet somehow, as I gazed at the glistening bracelet with its blend of muted greens, I felt like I understood what my mom meant. I felt my name. I understood why it was beautiful. I recognized its significance. In a way, it suggests that I mean more to my parents than other beauties and

wonders in the world, more than jade itself. Priceless. The thought makes me feel warm inside. *Precious*.

Google provides an additional definition, as I later discover. Apart from *jade* and *precious*, *yáo* means “mother-of-pearl”: a smooth, iridescent substance that forms the inner layer of oyster shells and is used in ornamentation like jewelry. A smooth, iridescent, pearlescent substance that I had to Google to even know about. Like the obscure precious jade, mother-of-pearl is little known, but secretly and subtly everywhere, both in nature and in our manmade items—and so beautiful. I love pearls. In their purest, natural, unaltered forms, they remind me that imperfection—misshapeness, lopsidedness, dents, peculiarity—can be beautiful, precious, highly coveted. Valued and valuable. Reflecting light and life.

That I, with my disproportionately Chinese name but disproportionately Western mindset, am okay. My lopsided identity is beautiful. So why should I hide that? I love my Chinese name.

The jade tells me that I am Teresa Shoe.

But French tells me that I am Teresa Zoo.

As I took out the millionth tissue that day to blow my nose, I thought, *Ugh. Je pense que je suis malade. Quelle tragédie*. (I think I’m sick. What a tragedy.)

Occasionally, a French thought pops into my mind. But that never happens with Mandarin.

Not 1/2 but 2/3 of my name is Chinese, not European, in origin: Teresa *Yao Xu*.

But at the same time, not 1/2 but 2/3 of the languages I can remotely claim to know are European, not Chinese, in origin: English, French, and Mandarin.

And the only two languages I can remotely claim to be literate in are European, not Chinese, in origin: English and French.

Not Mandarin. I may know what *Xu Yao* sounds like, but I don’t even know how to write my own name. I can’t recognize the black characters on red lanterns, or the gold characters on Lunar New Year red envelopes. I can’t recognize my grandma’s writing. Even my speaking and listening capabilities have diminished over the years as English has taken prominence in my life. I can’t understand Chinese songs or TV shows. I can’t read WeChat messages from people in my meditation centre. I don’t understand my dad’s random jokes or nicknames whenever he teases my mom and me at a restaurant. I never know what someone else’s Chinese name means. I only feel comfortable making the simplest small talk with my parents’ friends.

How can I be part of a culture if I can’t even speak the language?

I don’t deserve to call myself Teresa Shoe.

When my wrist became too big for my old jade bracelet, my mom got me a new one. Except it wasn't jade.

"This is pink jade," my mom said.

"Jade can be pink?"

Apparently so. It was light pink, a muted pink. It was somewhat translucent and glistened in the light. Beautiful. My chest swelled with joy. Pink was my favorite color, so now that I knew there was *pink* jade, I never wanted to go back to green. I thought it suited me better, anyway. Like me, it was Chinese but not: a different form of Chinese, perhaps, a bridge between two cultures and identities.

This is the real 'precious jade,' I thought. A special, rare form of jade—pink, not green. (English, French, not just Chinese.)

Pink jade told me I was Teresa Zoo. Or so I thought.

"Can anyone explain Adam and Eve's fall from grace?"

One hesitant hand went up. It was not mine, of course. I barely knew anything about Christianity.

My English teacher looked exasperated but unsurprised by our ignorance. After she had surveyed the class a couple of weeks ago to find out who identified as Christian—two out of thirty people, neither of whom were me—she had lowered her expectations regarding our knowledge of Christianity.

As she launched into an explanation about the Christian concept, I took notes and listened half-heartedly. I respected all beliefs and would never discriminate against someone for their faith, but I honestly didn't care much for Christianity—I just couldn't relate to it and wasn't particularly interested in learning about it. It even bothered me whenever we had to discuss religion (which was always Christianity) in class. *What about other religions?* I always thought. It didn't seem fair. There was a whole world of other beliefs and cultures out there. Yet somehow, just about everything we read had elements of Christianity, even though we were reading works in translation from other countries.

"You know," I suddenly heard my teacher say, and I blinked, returning to attention, "If you want to study English in university, you should read the Bible."

Um...*what?* That bit of advice did not sit well with me because *I* was thinking of majoring in English in college. It made sense—Christianity was truly everywhere in English literature—but

it also didn't. With all due respect, I did not want to read an entire Bible that I felt no emotional or spiritual connection to just because I wanted to study literature. I simply didn't feel connected to Christianity; I hadn't been raised to be Christian, and I was already Buddhist. I didn't like this neocolonial imposition of Christianity in school curricula, feeling obliged to embrace it; it wasn't as if we needed to know anything about Buddhism or any other faith system.

It was ironic. English was my favorite language and favorite school subject, yet I mentally groaned at Biblical allusions in literature and refused to embrace that aspect of Western culture. And, as I realized, that was because I wasn't completely "Western"; I couldn't be. No matter how skilled I am at English, I can't fully be part of that culture...nor do I want to be. I have been enculturated in a Western environment, but I've also grown up in a Chinese home. I speak English by day, but Mandarin by night. I celebrate Halloween and Christmas, but I also celebrate Lunar New Year and the Mid-Autumn Festival. I don't like chopsticks or WeChat, but I also don't like hockey or tailgates.

And, of course, I'm not Christian.

(Chinese, not just English or French.)

I love French, and I laugh at myself when I have random French thoughts.

But when I think *Quelle tragédie*, am I really feeling any sense of tragedy?

When I write "*ma chérie*" (my darling, my beloved), do I really feel any love or affection emanating from those words?

When a francophone speaker speaks, can I even understand half of what they're saying?

No. I don't. I don't understand French. I don't *feel* it. I have no memory of it. I have vague memories of people being addressed as *ma chérie* in exam texts and letters and videos and poetry, but no memory of anyone addressing me as *ma chérie*.

I laugh at myself for thinking in French. Maybe that means I love the language, but it's more of a joke than anything: speaking a language without really being part of the culture. It's imitation, a parody, an accent I can adopt. In a way, it's not a real language. I don't use it to express real emotions. It only brings back memories of French skits and films I had to make for class, not my real passions. *L'amour est mort*—love has died—but I don't feel any sense of pain. I see a sad and disturbing truth, but it's somewhat undermined by an apt rhyme.

It doesn't feel real.

Yet Mandarin is real. I have real memories of it and express real emotions with it, emotions that extend beyond humor and laughter. I never think that Mandarin is a joke or laugh at myself for speaking or thinking in it. I feel love and affection emanating from *bǎo bèi*, the Mandarin

equivalent of *ma chérie*. I remember my mom tucking me in to bed and murmuring *wo de bǎo bèi*... and I understand what she means by it.

I understand that *bǎo* itself means “precious”.

I don’t understand my dad’s random jokes or nicknames whenever he teases my mom and me at a restaurant, but I understand what he means by them—I understand that they’re meant to gently poke fun, a way of joking and making conversation. I regularly overhear conversations between my parents and their friends without difficulty, and I get especially annoyed and flustered when they talk about me. I can sense the unspoken connotations and associations of different words, far beyond the Chinese dictionary that I have never even read. When I read how “*nǐ hěn piào liang*” was translated as “you are beautiful” in Cassandra Clare’s *Clockwork Prince*, I didn’t think that was a completely accurate translation. *Měi lì*, I thought, *is the one that means “beautiful.”* *Piao liang* means “pretty”—only surface-level beauty. But *měi lì* goes deeper than merely looking beautiful—it is *being* beautiful, with connotations of grace and kindness and power.

Měi lì is more like *bǎo bèi*. Beautiful. Precious, like jade.

Maybe I understand Mandarin, then. Mandarin is intuitive, but French is not.

Maybe I never think in Mandarin because I never need to. I don’t need to expend mental energy to formulate grammatically-coherent thoughts and sentences the way I do for French. When my mom speaks to me, I don’t need to think before I respond. Laughter, joy, frustration, anger come out naturally. Even if the grammar or my pronunciation is incorrect, even if I subconsciously slip in some English words, I don’t think twice before I speak. Mandarin captures my genuine feelings.

Maybe I’m not that disconnected after all. Maybe I have the right to call myself Teresa Shoe.

Because not 2/3 but 1/2 of the languages I can even remotely claim to *understand* are European, not Chinese, in origin: English and Mandarin.

Years later, I realized that the pink jade bracelet wasn’t as beautiful as the pure jade one. It was beautiful, but it was too perfect to be real. It did have a gradient of pinks, but that gradient was too consistent. It hid complexity. It wasn’t mother-of-pearl, a pure pearl. Purity, one meaning of my name, is not perfection; if anything, purity is found in the imperfection of natural pearls. This artificial pink jade couldn’t be me. I wasn’t solely Teresa Shoe or Teresa Zoo.

I’m not even trying to be Teresa Shoe.

I can’t be the beautiful pink jade or any precious jade, much less a bridge between two cultural identities, because I never even say my middle name. I never even acknowledge who I am.

And I still love French. I love how it flows. Whether or not I understand it, I'm still in awe of the language's beauty. Even as I laugh at it, I listen to French music and appreciate French poetry and feel proud whenever I understand it in real life. I don't even hesitate to write in French—my thoughts pour out, grammatically coherent or not. Maybe I don't feel like I'm expressing my real thoughts and emotions when I speak French, but when I write, I'm writing what I feel. When I wrote a letter to a hypothetical politician for an assignment, I was sincere in my defense of biodiversity and condemnation of climate change inaction. When I analyzed a French poem for class, it was just like writing an English essay: I was purposeful in what I wrote and took my close reading to heart.

I don't know how to say jade in French, but I want to learn it.

I don't know how to write jade in Mandarin, but I'm not sure I want to learn it.

It doesn't matter if I understand Mandarin better than French: English—which lays claim to both literacy and understanding and has captured my mind, heart, and soul—has made me *prefer* French. It's comforting to see the Latin alphabet. It's fun to notice all the ways in which English and French are similar and different. It gives me a headache to try to understand one word of Mandarin.

Why is it that I continue to take French classes despite my struggle to *understand* the language, especially when spoken—a struggle I don't face with Mandarin?

When I was 15, I attended a summer program for high school students at Harvard University. I wasn't sure if I had ever been so nervous yet excited. I had never done anything like this in my life. Sure, I had gone on some two-day weekend camping trips without my parents, but this program was *two weeks* in another country with classes in the most prestigious school on the planet. A summer camp/summer school combo of sorts within intimidating walls of prestige, achievement, and wealth.

The day I arrived, it was so hot outside that I couldn't wait to get my keycard and settle in. My mom helped me carry some luggage up the stairs—for some reason, the elevator wouldn't work.

"Welcome!" a woman said as I entered my hallway. "I'm Kate, one of the residence coordinators. It's great to meet you!"

I shook her hand. "I'm Teresa. It's nice to meet you!"

"Your room is just down that way," she said, pointing down the hallway. My mom and I thanked her and began scanning all the different rooms. Each door had a large name-tag on it. Joanna, Stephanie, Laura, Emily...Teresa. But it wasn't just Teresa—the name on my door read "TERESA YAO" in capitalized letters.

Teresa Yao? I thought. What on Earth? I didn't think I had ever seen my name written like that, with my middle name but not my last name. I thought about it some more, even as my mom and I began unpacking, and then I realized that it was probably because I had written "Teresa Yao" as my given name when I registered for the program. My mom told me to write that because she thought given name included middle names—which does make sense. It's the name you would give your children, right? Not the last name they inherit. But looking at that "TERESA YAO" on my door, and later discovering that my student card also bore my middle name, "Teresa Yao Xu" ...I didn't like it. It made me feel uncomfortable. *It should just be Teresa*, I thought. "Teresa Xu" was fine, but "Teresa Yao" left a bitter taste in my mouth. My stomach turned. I only thought of myself as Teresa, so this paradigm shift wasn't exactly appreciated. Now I never want to write my middle name, even when the prompt is "full name".

Despite all its beauty and uniqueness and perfect imperfection, I can't connect "Yao" to "Teresa"—and I hate that.

My name is a bit *too* suitable for me. Beautiful and precious for a beautifully complex cultural identity. A pure pearl, imperfect yet stunning and valuable; a valuable perspective on life. Meaningful; a family heirloom. But, above all, whether it's *yáo* the precious jade or *yáo* the mother-of-pearl, I have never heard of these concepts in my real-world life. They are hidden, cloaked in obscurity—just like my middle name. My name is a hidden gem because no one uses *yáo* to refer to jade or mother-of-pearl, but that doesn't mean *I* have to hide it. I don't want to conceal such beauty, but I don't know how to bring it to light.

I hate that I hide it.

I hate that no one knows the jade that's even more precious than jade.

The jade shatters. The pink and green lose their shine.

And I weep. I weep for a gem who tries to kill the source of her sheen.