

## ADVENTURES WITH MY NAME

By Hope Anderson

The Chinese cashier at my neighborhood supermarket peers over her glasses as she scans my groceries and demands, in Cantonese, “Who gave you such a funny name? Your mother? Your father? Your grandmother?” I try to explain that Hope isn’t a funny name in English, but in Cantonese the words aren’t exactly tripping off my tongue. The cashier isn’t even listening, having moved on to her next question: “Do you know what your name is in Chinese?”

Well, yes; it’s *hay mong-wish*--but Wish is not a name in Chinese, which is probably why she thinks Hope can’t possibly be a name in English. “*Hay mong*,” she says triumphantly. I nod and root around for my wallet. Though I’d love to hang around and discuss the Chinese version of my name, my groceries are already bagged. As I pay, I notice the people behind me in the checkout line watching me with interest, perhaps because they’ve never seen a blue-eyed blonde speaking Cantonese. I grab my bags, tell the cashier I’ll see her next time and leave, slightly bothered by her characterization of my name as funny.

Still, I should be used to it by now. Responses to my name range from the rhapsodic “Hope? Man, I’ve been waitin’ for you!--to the rude--“That’s *not* a name.” On some days, the world seems populated by people who can’t believe they’re not the first to come up with Hopeful and Hopeless, and, worse, who believe I should be delighted by their puns. On other days, people merely ask what my name means, which I thought would be obvious. The frequency of these occurrences should make me want to change my name but the truth is, I’ve never even considered it.

My name brings out the best in me, except of course when strangers are mocking it, and has myriad advantages over other names. Because it has never been in vogue, Hope doesn’t date me the way so many “popular” names--Marilyn and Linda and Kim--do other women. Like so many names, mine appears in the Bible, but as a virtue rather than a person, which gives it a post-modern twist. Most of all, unlike the vast majority of names, Hope translates into every language.

Because I was born in Hong Kong to an American mother and an Anglo-Asian father, ease of translation was paramount in their choice of baby names. For my two older sisters, my parents chose names that adapted to all European languages, but Hope was their best effort, a truly international name that sounded good with Anderson.

I was born three months prematurely, weighing a whopping 2 1/3 pounds, and those who know the circumstances of my birth often assume my name was inspired by my survival. But my parents, neither sentimental nor spontaneous, chose Hope well in advance of my birth. Their choice was deeply practical, a presumption of a life that would be lived abroad, at least in part.

From the very beginning, my name brought me notoriety. In elementary school, it provided classmates a large number of rhyming possibilities--*soap pope dope rope cope mope nope*--all guaranteed to infuriate me. Adults felt the need to create a nickname from it--Hopie or Hopeful or Hopeless--a practice I strongly discouraged. I tolerated Hopie only from family members who one by one gave it up, until only my mother used it. Eventually, tired of being the lone holdout, even she started calling me Hope.

Oddly, given my parents' motivations, my fully translatable name is a mixed blessing when I travel. My mother used to tell me Hope was an English name, but as far as I can tell it is never used as a first name in Britain. In fact, because it is a Scottish surname (i.e., Bob Hope), reservations clerks at British hotels always assume I am a man. While I can understand why I'm known all over Asia as Mr. Hope Anderson, the fact that every hotel clerk in England also calls me Mr. starts each visit there on an annoying note. In Africa, where Hope sometimes *is* a male name, and where people are called everything under the sun, my name is unremarkable. But the best place to be named Hope, and the only place where I have never gotten comments, nicknames, or puns, is Boston. After all, it was the Puritans who first named their daughters Hope. To this day, the name remains fairly common throughout New England.

But because I live on a coast where Puritans never settled, the commentary never stops. Lately I've been having problems with customer service representatives, who even after coaching spell my name "Hobé" or "Hop." At my favorite Mexican restaurant, I've taken to using Esperanza, because the girl behind the register always shouts "Hó" when my order comes up. Though I try to be patient with non-native speakers, I draw the line at being called "ho," which has an electrifying effect on everyone within earshot.

"Your name in Spanish is dreadful," comments an English friend who grew up in Argentina. When I asked why, she tells me it's old-fashioned. That may be the case; nevertheless, Spanish speakers who can't pronounce Hope must call me Esperanza.

As for the French, with their difficulties with h's, my options are "Oop" or Esperance, which carries the same quaint ring as Esperanza. This was made clear when I dated a Frenchman who managed to avoid using my name at all. On the phone it was "Hi, it's Francois," while in person it was nothing--no name, no term of endearment, just an awkward dive into conversation. Francois's failure to speak my name left me dumbstruck--I couldn't even bring myself to confront him about it. Finally, at a dinner party, I blurted out, "Francois hates my name. He never says it." Francois agreed. "In French, it's awful," he said. "It's religious, like Dolores."

"Well it's not that way in English," I replied, "Anyway, it's my name, so you'll just have to say it."

When another week went by with no result, I decided it was the H that was holding Francois back. By then, I would have been happy with Ope or even Oop; still, he wouldn't say it. Eventually, I resorted to tacking a postscript onto an e-mail, like a

seventh-grader: "Francois, I'd really appreciate it if you would say my name. It's a matter of courtesy, so I'm sure you understand how alienating it is that you never do?"

Francois responded that he "wasn't aware" that he wasn't saying my name. "There you go, Hope," he wrote.

"You didn't say it; you e-mailed it. I'm still waiting," I wrote back.

In the end Francois said Hope on my answering machine, pronouncing the h perfectly. But it didn't matter: the matter of my name had exposed a trait I couldn't overlook, his indifference to my feelings. When I broke up with Francois shortly afterward, I felt more relief than regret.

Since then, I've managed to avoid relationships with people who dislike my name, which I think is understandable, since it is me and I am it. Timeless, compact and loaded with meaning, Hope manages to be much more than a name. It is a motto that consigns me to optimism and forward movement. It demands a cheerful outlook in the face of all life's difficulties, and I wouldn't have it any other way.