

ACTIVITY 19

Our Names and Our Place in the World

Purpose: Consider what parts of our identities we choose for ourselves and what parts are chosen for us, as well as the impact that labels can have on our identities.

ADVISOR NOTES:

1. Full Version of Jennifer Wang's Essay

If you have more time to devote to this activity, you can find the full version of Jennifer Wang's essay, **Names and Identity**, at facinghistory.org/advisory-media.

APPROXIMATE TIME:

30 minutes

MATERIALS:

READING
Orientation Day

HANDOUT
Orientation Day Graphic Organizer

PROCEDURE:

1. Discuss the Relationship between Names and Identity

- In their journals or with a partner in a "pair-share" format, ask advisees to respond to the following question:

My name is/isn't a good fit for my personality because . . .

While advisees should be able to keep their responses private, time allowing, ask if any volunteers want to share their thoughts with the group.

- Then discuss the following question together: *What do our names reveal about our identities?* Consider listing your advisees' ideas on the board to reference later in the session.

2. Read Aloud a Teenager's Story about Her Name

- Pass out the reading **Orientation Day** and **read aloud** Jennifer Wang's story about the tension she feels between her name and her identity (visit facinghistory.org/advisory-media to learn about the Read Aloud teaching strategy).
- To help advisees engage with the text, ask them to underline or put a star in the margin by places where they can relate to Jennifer's experience. They can also write a question mark in places where her experience raises questions for them.

3. Discuss the Essay in Small Groups

Pass out the handout **Orientation Day Graphic Organizer** and divide your advisory into groups of three. Have advisees share what they starred and questioned in the text and then work together to complete the handout.

Bring the group together in a circle to share from their handouts. Then discuss the following questions as an advisory group:

- What could Wang's teacher have done to make her feel more welcome in the class?
- What could other students have done to make Wang feel like she belonged?
- What is important to know about each other in order to work together as an advisory this year?



Orientation Day

Directions: In this essay, 17-year-old Jennifer Wang, who came to the United States from Beijing, China, when she was seven, reflects on a time when she had to introduce herself to a group of strangers at a new school. As you read, underline the words and phrases that Wang uses to describe her identity.

Something about myself? How do I summarize, in thirty seconds, everything which adds up and equals a neat little bundle called Me? Who am I, and why do I matter to any of you?

First of all, I am a girl who wandered the aisles of Toys “R” Us for two hours, hunting in vain for a doll with a yellowish skin tone. I am a girl who sat on the cold bathroom floor at seven in the morning, cutting out the eyes of Caucasian models in magazines, trying to fit them on my face . . .

While I was growing up, I did not understand what it meant to be “Chinese” or “American.” Do these terms link only to citizenship? Do they suggest that people fit the profile of either “typical Chinese” or “typical Americans”? And who or what determines when a person starts feeling American, and stops feeling Chinese?

I eventually shunned the Asian crowds. And I hated Chinatown. . . . I hated the noise, the crush of bodies, the yells of mothers to fathers to children to uncles to aunts to cousins. . . . I hated not understanding their language in depth—the language of my ancestors, which was also supposed to be mine to mold and master.

I am still not a citizen of the United States of America, this great nation, which is hailed as the destination for generations of people, the promised land for millions. . . . I stare blankly at my friends when they mention the 1980s or share stories of their parents as hippies. And I hate baseball.

The question lingers: Am I Chinese? Am I American? Or am I some unholy mixture of both, doomed to stay torn between the two?

I don’t know if I’ll ever find the answers. Meanwhile, it’s my turn to introduce myself . . . I stand up and say, “My name is Jennifer Wang,” and then I sit back down. There are no other words that define me as well as those do. No others show me being stretched between two very different cultures and places—the “Jennifer” clashing with the “Wang,” the “Wang” fighting with the “Jennifer.”¹

¹ Jennifer Wang, “Orientation Day,” in *YELL-Oh Girls! Emerging Voices Explore Culture, Identity, and Growing Up Asian American*, ed. Vickie Nam (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 199–200. Reproduced by permission from HarperCollins Publishers.



Orientation Day Graphic Organizer

Directions: Discuss the following questions and record your ideas in the boxes below.

How do you think it feels to have different parts of your identity fighting against each other? What are some of the factors that can impact how people feel about their identities?

What words or phrases does Wang use to describe her identity?	What words or phrases does Wang use to describe her attitude—how she feels—toward her identity?
What do you think is the most valuable idea in the essay? Why?	What advice could you give Jennifer Wang that would help her move between these two worlds?

How do you think it feels to have different parts of your identity fighting against each other? What are some of the factors that can impact the way people feel about their identities?