

How to put on and off a name

Miho Ogino

In Japan, there is a system called the Family Registry (*koseki*). Recorded in this governmental registry is information about one's life: birth, sex, the order of birth, marriage, divorce and death. A newborn baby is named and then registered into the family's registry, which in principal must remain unchanged for one's lifetime. In addition, there is a list of certain kanji (Chinese-graph) that can be used for names. If parents pick any kanji outside of this list, the municipal office won't accept the birth certificate. There is also no way to register how to read (pronounce) the kanji. For instance, you can register your baby the Chinese character 右 (reads *migi*, meaning "right" of left/right) but you can also read the character as *hidari* (meaning "left") or *man'naka* (meaning "center"). You see how odd the system is.

Recently, people of Gender/Sex Identity Disorder (GID) are observed to change their names, which has been accepted as an exceptional case. For those suffering from the incoherence between his or her own physical and admitted sexes, to alter a "female name" to "male name," or vice versa, is a small window of solution. A law permitting the change of name and sex in the family registry, including sex-change operations, was enacted last year and enforced starting July 2004. Nonetheless, there are many strict conditions to meet this law. For example, the sex change request is not allowed for those married or who have children from a past marriage. The law is not fully welcomed in society, even among the privy.

I imagine there are many people, besides those with GID, who feel uncomfortable with the names their parents have given them. In the old days of Japan, we had a wonderful custom where the name commonly changed at the turn of events—as a snake casting off its skin—such as one's childhood to adulthood, marriage, and advancement. It is unfortunate that this superb custom was lost with the enactment of the family registry system.

I have changed my name several times. My parents named me “Mihoko.” I was born in China, and soon our family moved back to Japan when Japan was defeated in World War II. When we returned, my grandfather turned in my birth certificate in which he mistakenly wrote “Miho” instead of “Mihoko.” In my childhood, I hated the name on the family registry. I came to believe that my true name was “Mihoko” and wanted to push through it. My family name was “Takimoto,” which I also disliked for the look and solemn feeling in its sound. For this reason, I was pleased when I got married and changed my maiden name to “Ogino.” Meanwhile, I had children, encountered feminism, and returned back to school to major in women's history. When I started publishing as a young scholar, I found that the prudish impression of the “Mihoko Ogino” did not fit my spirit. I found that my identity had changed from "Mihoko" to "Miho" [without my knowing it](#). I did not get along with my husband, split with him eventually, but still I arranged the paperwork to keep my married name. Divorced, I started my new life as “Miho Ogino,” finally convinced that my inner- and outer-selves had become identical. I was deeply pleased with this as much as the divorce.

The only inconvenience of this name is that it is often confused with “Hagino” [the Chinese character of “ogi” and “haji” are quite similar: 荻 (ogi) and 萩 (hagi)]. I continually have had to spend some energy to correct the confusion, which felt no good, as if I were squeamish. In a sense I have been blaming Miho “Hagino” for this reason.

One day, I received an email from Mexico out of blue. It was from a woman named “Miho Hagino” with whom I’ve always been mistaken. She said that besides she, there is another “Miho Hagino,” and asked me to join them by contributing an essay to an upcoming art exhibition of theirs. She explained that she too was often mistaken for Miho Ogino. I took the offer due to a sort of responsibility. I have not met the two Miho Haginos, but seen some of their works on the internet.

The world they are living and working is so different from mine. But I wonder, among the many turning points in my life, if I have taken different directions only once or twice, I

might be living completely different lives in completely different places. This thought amuses me.

Some while ago, I read an article about a man named Hirokazu Tanaka, who found a dozen people with the same family and given name, and visited two of them. In describing the feeling, Mr. Tanaka said, “It is not me but also it is me. It is somewhat a subtle sensation that my ego is pervading.” “Yes, right on!” I nodded.

Looking back, I have been “Miho Ogino” as if it were a single coat that I’ve had for a while now. Perhaps, though, a day might come to take off one or two layers of myself.