

American Immigrants and the Dilemma of ‘White-Sounding’ Names

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“As a foreigner in the U.S., since the first day I arrived,” says Xian Zhao, “I have been constantly asking myself this question: Should I adopt an Anglo name?”

Zhao, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Toronto, says that his cousin and his aunt changed their name from Pengyuan and Guiqing to Jason and Susan, respectively, upon moving to the U.S. Some of his grad-school peers made similar decisions, but after some deliberation while completing his Ph.D. in the U.S., he resolved to continue using his given first name, which means “significant” and “outstanding.” “Hearing people calling me Alex or Daniel doesn’t mean anything to me,” he told me.

The dilemma, though, inspired Zhao to study first names in an academic capacity, which he’s done with Monica Biernat, a psychology professor at the University of Kansas who was his Ph.D. advisor. Most recently, they [looked at](#) the relationship between someone’s first name and whether people would offer them help in “hypothetical life-and-death situations.”