



Reviews

LEARNING OUR NAMES: ASIAN AMERICAN CHRISTIANS ON IDENTITY, RELATIONSHIPS, AND VOCATION by Sabrina S. Chan, Linson Daniel, E. David de Leon, and La Thao. Lisle, IL. InterVarsity Press, 2022. 240 pages. \$21.99 (paperback).

Learning Our Names: Asian American Christians on Identity, Relationships, and Vocation is an insightful read that weaves together personal narratives, ethnic history, and theological reflections to explore the complex interplay of identity, culture, and Christian religious tradition. Drawing on the collective wisdom and lived experiences of four Asian American co-authors, the volume challenges the reader to reclaim the very names that have been distorted, mispronounced, or used as instruments of exclusion, transforming these symbols of oppression into means of solidarity and hope.

As the title suggests, the core message of the book is grounded on the power of naming. Chapter one makes this point clear by quoting a Tagalog proverb, reminding the reader that “a person who does not know where they came from will never reach their destination” (p. 12). This saying captures well the book’s position that understanding one’s origins is crucial not only for personal identity but also for the resilience of the collective community. Therefore, the work urges the reader to see that the Asian American names are more than mere labels; they are narrative devices, through which the Asian American stories—such as the complex history of migration, involuntary displacement, and cultural negotiation—are all preserved and transformed.

The book is thematically divided into different sections that address the Asian American identity (Part I), relationships (Part II), and vocation (Part III). Through personal stories and engagement with the Christian Scriptures, the authors offer insights into navigating family expectations, racial stereotypes, and the pursuit of collective justice in the communal context. Ultimately, the work encourages Asian Americans to fully

embrace their ethnocultural heritage, resist the model minority myth, and find authentic community in the Christian faith tradition. The reclamation of agency is definitely a central theme. The book states, “Names matter. We have the opportunity to exercise agency in how we live into names that lead us into life or reject names that ultimately bring about death” (p. 20). In other words, the volume suggests that while names can be abused as tools of alienation, they nonetheless should be reappropriated as symbols of empowerment to reclaim power and forge solidarity.

While I appreciate the book’s emphasis on the reclamation of agency, I also want to offer a critique of its approach. I agree that it is necessary and even healing to recover culturally-specific narratives. And yet, over-celebrating the Asian American stories and cultural narratives may unintentionally and inadvertently reinforce the boundaries established by oppressive forces and structural systems. In other words, I contend that when we build ethnocultural solidarity solely on a socially constructed category, we risk reifying divisions that the good news seeks to transcend (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:14–16). To put it differently, the very empowering act of naming our Asian American heritage may also sustain the very markers of historical hierarchy that have long been employed by colonial powers to divide and oppress people. This tension is not easily resolved, I admit. Hence, the book’s wrestling on these very issues stands out as a worthy effort.

Ultimately, I commend *Learning Our Names* for offering a clear roadmap for navigating the complex terrain of living as Asian Americans in the United States. As a first-generation Chinese American, I am reminded that while the very category of Asian American may be socially constructed, it can also serve as fertile ground for transformation when approached with critical awareness. For the broader Asian American community, *Learning Our Names* helps us reclaim our ethnocultural narratives and agency, an act that includes confrontation of the painful legacies of exclusion and oppression, both in the past and at the present moment. As such, Christian leaders should read this volume, for it offers a concrete framework of how the grammar of past oppression may be transformed into a helpful future of solidarity; namely, a future where the power of an Asian American name is celebrated, not as a mark of subjugation but as a testimony of resilience and grace.

In this vision, the recovery of our individual and collective Asian American names and stories is not the final destination but the essential first step toward a more inclusive and empowered community.

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