

Wings of Aspiration

An essay about my first name

Think of the most exotic name you know. Mine is Jiayu. Give it a try! Many people stumble over its pronunciation, often guessing "Jary" or "Jayou." As a result, I sometimes introduce myself by my middle name, Ellie. Yet, I deeply cherish my first name, Jiayu, which translates to "beautiful wings." Jia (佳) means "beautiful" and "excellent," while Yu (羽) stands for "feathers" or "wings." This name, to me, holds a significance beyond its sound.

My parents, immigrants from China to U.S., named me Jiayu with thoughtful intention. When I asked them the origin of my name, they couldn't help but smile; it was like they had done a long-term research project and were waiting for the very moment to present the findings. Since my birth year coincided with the Chinese Year of the Tiger, they chose the name "Yu" to embody the idea of a tiger gaining wings to become more powerful from an ancient Chinese idiom. Tigers, in Chinese culture, are revered as the king of all animals. Interestingly, the black stripes on a tiger's forehead resemble the Chinese character "Wang" (王) – which means "king" and also happens to be my mother's surname. To honor my father named "Peng," symbolizing an enormous mythological bird that can fly high and thousands of miles without rest, my mom selected Yu (羽) to represent wings. Hence my name symbolizes the undying support from my father, always with me like the steadfast wings of a bird. Furthermore, Yu (羽) also represents the last music note (La) in the Chinese Pentatonic Scale, signifying spreading out positive energy. As lovers of music, my parents wish for me to find joy in melodies, regardless of life's challenges, and to spread this beauty and resilience to others. Jiayu, therefore, isn't just a name; it encapsulates my parents' blessings, aspirations for my journey, and the beauty they hope I spread in the world.

My name has become an inseparable part of who I am, reminding me of my identity and roots. It contains a paradox, though. In the ancient Chinese language, "Yu" means both "feather" and "wing." Most people readily notice a beautiful, large bird with massive wings soaring across the sky, but often I feel like a feather that doesn't get the same immediate attention. Sometimes I can be outstanding, taking multiple academic risks, or sometimes the complete opposite, too reserved, and too afraid to ask a question if I'm confused. Just like my name, which is often dismissed as too challenging to pronounce, I sometimes feel dismissed as reserved and quiet, like a feather that effortlessly blends into the landscape.

Yet, I am fully aware of my parents' love, expectations, and support through the name they gave me. My name serves as my beacon, guiding me through life's maze. It is like an art piece in a vast gallery filled with thousands of other masterpieces, patiently waiting for a discerning eye. It personifies a fledgling bird, beneath whose fine feathers, and sturdy wings grow, eventually transforming it into a winged tiger. It is an angelic bird song, soft and gentle but warm and all empowering. Every morning, greeted by my mother's voice uttering "Jiayu," accompanied by the aroma of delicious toast, I feel a sense of purpose. It pushes me to strive and embrace challenges with enthusiasm. Outside the academic realm, it nudges me to immerse in music, spreading its joy to those around me.

My name, Jiayu, represents my lineage, captures my parents' dreams, and maps my ambitions. It serves as a bridge, linking my rich ancestral heritage to my current pursuits and future goals. While it may challenge some with its pronunciation, to me, it's a symphony of stories, lessons, and dreams. Each time it's uttered, it's not just a name being called out; it's a call to strength, elegance, and tradition. By cherishing Jiayu, I salute my past, celebrate my present, and eagerly anticipate the vast horizons of the future.