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Cultural adjustments

Negotiating difference in public spaces sometimes takes an approach that's, well, *different*

By [Ellen Cochrane](#)

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I recall how Brightwater smashed the tip of the pen into the student referral: *Student rude to teacher. Student disruptive. Student called me Mr. Brightwater.* Eyes fixed furiously on the discipline clerk, Brightwater slammed the paper into the in-box. "I want to see the vice principal by 3:30 today."

I was the teacher filling in for the vice principal.

A few hours later, Brightwater sat fuming in front of me. "Chong Vang called me *mister!*" Dressed in a natty pea-green suit with a thin powder-blue tie, Brightwater leaned back in the chair and crossed a polished penny loafer over one knee, exposing charcoal and black argyle. "This is so disrespectful. It's unbelievable what we have to put up with. It's bad enough that they don't read or think. Now they insult us."

I'd never really thought much about Brightwater before, but I thought a lot about Chong Vang, who had been in my class the year before. He was a Hmong immigrant from the camps in Thailand. He was only an average delinquent; he was in trouble once for a fight over a pencil and later for peeing in a water bottle.

Brightwater, on the other hand, was the epitome of professionalism and notorious for excellent teaching and expecting high standards from students. Chong made the mistake of calling Brightwater "Mister"—when actually Brightwater was a she. What exactly she was—transgender, transsexual, lesbian, cross-dresser, mind-bender, groundbreaker or social activist—none of her colleagues dared ask. What was clear to us at Jefferson High School was she was a female dressed elaborately in traditional men's clothing.

"So, what exactly did Chong say?" I asked, eyeing my fingernails.

"He called me Mister!"

"Was he," I paused carefully, "mocking you?"

"I don't know what he thought he was doing. He knows who I am—I'm Ms. Brightwater."

"Ok ... disrespectful to staff. I'll schedule the translator and pull Chong in for a chat. I think things should be OK after that," I said in a hopeful tone.

Brightwater stood up, spine stiff. "It better be. I don't have to tolerate this."

During the next morning's tardy sweep, I urged students to class with the rumble of Darth Vader's theme song pounding out of the school speakers. Packs of girls squealed and hugged desperately, bracing themselves for the 54 minutes they would be apart. I was surprised to see Chong and his parents come through the front gate.

They followed Chong, father first, craning his neck up to peer at the Quonset hut gymnasium, sweeping his eyes across the green lawn, inspecting groups of slow-moving students. Talking nonstop, the wife walked four feet behind him and showered both males with a cascade of words. Her tone rattled up and down; none of it sounded good.



He? She? It? I'm sooo confused!

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"School Two," I crackled into my radio. "I need the Hmong translator in my office" I took a big breath and followed the trio into the office.

The translator, Tot Lek, smiled as he entered and sat. I couldn't help beaming back. He was the genuine article: a "land of a thousand smile" poster boy. His dad was Thai, mom Hmong. He began, "Mr. Vang asks why Chong is in trouble."

"Well, that's a good question," I began. "Chong's English teacher, Ms. Brightwater, said that Chong was disrespectful."

A pause for translation, then a torrent of Hmong erupted from the mother.

"Mrs. Vang wants to know why Chong is punished because he didn't know that Ms. Brightwater was a Man-Woman."

"Man-Woman." Tot said it so delicately. So precisely.

The Vangs weren't far-right, anti-homosexual crusaders or hate-mongers. I could imagine them back in Bangkok, whispering about private, tolerated places with secret knocks. Places filled with packs of Brightwaters dancing and laughing. But over here, the presence of a Man-Woman in a public school astonished them.

"They think Chong made an honest mistake," reported Tot. "In Thailand, a Man-Woman does not teach school."

But how could I tell the Vangs that Brightwater is not a Man-Woman, but a Woman-Woman in a Man-Man suit, and that in America this is quite okay. And that a Man-Woman, a Woman-Woman, a Man-Man or a Woman-Man can teach in public schools.

"Chong, you do know that your English teacher is a woman and that you need to address her as Ms. Brightwater?" I asked.

He looked up from his sneakers and mumbled, "Do now."

He was lying. Chong's body was still. His breathing steady, but there was a slight flick of his eyes to the left. You just *know* these things after a while.

Another staccato blast from Mrs. Vang, and Tot, his face bland but eyes wide, gently translated. "Mrs. Vang says she has a Woman-Man cousin and nobody gets in trouble if they call him *miss*."

I gave Tot time to translate. "Chong's been in Brightwater's class for two months. He should know that his teacher is a woman. I'll change the punishment to an hour after school detention. But from now on Chong must address Ms. Brightwater correctly."

The parents nodded solemnly. They seemed satisfied with the reduced sentence.

"Chong, do you understand? No more 'Mister' Brightwater. It's Ms. Brightwater. Do your work and be respectful."

Chong nodded grimly.

Word got around. The next week, a group of Brightwater's fifth period dozing Russian boys stirred themselves to answer "Yes, *sir!*" to all her questions and requests. They also entered the classroom and stood at attention, Soviet-enlistee style: chests puffed, shoulders slammed back, chins up with sharp salutes at their foreheads. Delighted, they watched her eyes narrow and face flush a deep red. I guess it was one of the few pleasures that could rouse them from near-comas, brought on by folding and delivering newspapers at three in the morning.

But Brightwater didn't crack. Not to be outwitted by any Pentecostal, communist-bred immigrant schoolchildren, she maneuvered down the rows of seats to lean her bony frame down into their faces. Her dangling tie brushed the desktop, her lips mere inches from theirs, she asked in a dangerous voice if they knew the difference between "sir" and "ma'am."

The boys assumed a blurry-eyed confusion and shrugged innocently. Brightwater spent a half-hour of class time explaining English proper forms of address.

Brightwater's war with the immigrant groups went on all year. After the Russians calmed down, the Mexican boys started to call her "señor."

Several suspensions later, the class grew as quiet as mice, in awe of her steely resolve, but they still called her "Man-Woman" behind her back. Chong started behaving better and received a "C" from Brightwater at the end of the year.

Brightwater continues to wear her suits with pride, except for special event days at school when she might come in jammies, as a hippie or a pumpkin. The sex of the pumpkin is the only thing we're sure of these days.

It's an It-It.