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International Adoption, Dyadic Belonging, and the Liminal Self: The Case of a Korean American Adoptee's Return to South Korea

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Abstract

This paper examines the social location and conflicting identities of Korean American adoptees often referred to as KADs. Utilizing participant observation and interviews conducted in South Korea, the author discusses how Confucian ideology, which stresses consanguineal relations, affects and shapes the ways in which the Korean government and society view KADs in the context of international adoption. The author also draws upon personal field experiences in South Korea to highlight the expectations placed upon KADs in a Korean context, and how this can result in identity confusion and reconfiguration upon their return to a country that has been historically ashamed of them.

Keywords

International adoption, dyadic belonging, liminality, KAD, South Korea, rite of passage

Cover Page Footnote

First, I would like to thank the Anthropology faculty at Western Oregon University for their support and guidance. Dr. Isidore Lobnibe, Dr. Robin Smith, and Dr. Misty Weitzel have been true inspiration, and I will never forget all that they have done for me. I would also like to specifically thank Dr. Isidore Lobnibe for spending countless hours helping me develop and execute my thesis project. Lastly, I would like to extend my gratitude to Molly Holt and Holt Ilsan Town for their warm hearts and open arms while abroad in South Korea.

International Adoption, Dyadic Belonging, and the Liminal Self: The Case of a Korean American Adoptee's Return to South Korea

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This paper examines the social location and conflicting identities of Korean American adoptees often referred to as KADs. Utilizing participant observation and interviews conducted in South Korea, the author discusses how Confucian ideology, which stresses consanguineal relations, affects and shapes the ways in which the Korean government and society view KADs in the context of international adoption. The author also draws upon personal field experiences in South Korea to highlight the expectations placed upon KADs in a Korean context, and how this can result in identity confusion and reconfiguration upon their return to a country that has been historically ashamed of them.

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Introduction

I was two months into my South Korean trip in the fall of 2011, when the splendors of living in a foreign country started to dissipate. I longed to be around English speakers, to eat a cheeseburger with fries, and ultimately, to feel comfortable in my own skin. Up until that point, everything was a new experience and had been exhilarating, but the constant change had become less exciting and more stressful. I wanted to do something or go somewhere more familiar, and I decided there was no better place to go than the International District in Seoul.

The other volunteers from Ilisan Town, also Korean-American adoptees (KADs), and I dressed in our best clothing and headed off to see the play, "The Importance of Being Earnest." The crew and the actors were from England, and we were ecstatic about being around people to whom we could relate and understand, and vice versa.

Moreover, we were in a district that many natives did not venture into, and found ourselves to be the only Koreans in the room. For the first time, I felt completely comfortable with my surroundings while abroad, but something still felt off. The other volunteers and I conferred with one another and came to the realization that while we believed we fit comfortably into this situation, we were actually being seen as the "other."

My field experience captured above was a seminal moment in South Korea. While being "othered" is not foreign to KADs whether it is in an American or Korean context, it served as a reminder to me and my fellow volunteers that we live in a liminal social space: we may feel American in the U.S., but other people may not perceive us as such and question our ethnic identity. While abroad, Korean natives perceived us as fellow Koreans,

but we felt completely estranged. Thus, independent of location, we are continuously questioned and expected to fill different roles: in America, we are assumed to be foreigners, and in South Korea, we are assumed to be natives—we are always betwixt and between.

In this paper, I explore how Confucian ideology, which stresses consanguineal relations, has affected the Korean government and society's perceptions of international adoption and KAD identity. I illustrate how Confucian values have fashioned expectations for KADs, which are implicitly and explicitly placed upon them through government and public discourse. I argue that the conflict between how KADs identify themselves based upon notions of identity in an American context, and how they are expected to be in a Korean context results in identity confusion.

To better understand this dilemma, it is essential to first address the inception of international adoption in South Korea and how historical problems necessitated the need for adoption. This historical knowledge will aid in a better understanding of the current situation of international adoption in the country and demonstrate how Confucian ideology has created differing notions of identity and unachievable expectations for KADs in a Korean context. I further explain the variance between the American and South Korean notions of identity, and how identity formation is unique to this population by drawing on my own positionality as a KAD to help orient the reader. The phenomenon that I speak of is not only informed by history and traditional ideology, but also by the reality of KADs whose stories I analyze in this paper from an anthropological perspective.

The Unspoken History of Adoption in South Korea

Since the Joseon Dynasty (circa 1392), South Korea has employed Confucianism not so much as a religion, but as a political tool to create social order and hierarchy. Even though Christianity is the most widely practiced religion in South Korea, Confucian values remain influential. These values do not condone adoption of those who are not of the same bloodline: filial piety is one of the greatest Confucian virtues, which elicits the respect that a child or person should show based upon hierarchical tiers. First, one must honor thy country, then thy parents. Inherently, Confucian ideology produces an analogous and physical distance between tiers in the name of respect and stresses the emphasis on nationalism and the preservation of tradition.

Immediately following the Korean War and the Armistice Agreement signed in 1953, South Korea emerged from political turmoil with an abundance of “GI babies” (U.S. Department of State). These were children who were conceived by Korean women and Western soldiers. In the 1950s and 1960s, the first wave of orphans were mixed-race and born to poor factory workers. An insufficient amount of resources and space for the influx of orphans combined with the Confucian family ideology in Korea led to a rejection of adoptions all together that were not between blood relatives (Volkman 2005: 58).

As a result of the widely held Confucian views on adoption, international adoptions became the best option for South Korean-born children in need of homes. From 1954 onward, the adoption of children from South Korea to the Western hemisphere became so popular that over 150,000 South Korean children were adopted within fifty years by Americans and Europeans (Kim 2007: 498). In 1955, Harry and Bertha Holt became pioneers of transnational adoption after they adopted eight children from South Korea. They then established Holt International Children’s Services (HICS) in 1956 (Volkman 2005: 56). Since the 1960s, rapid industrialization in South Korea has allowed the country to turn itself into a modernized nation. Such rapid progress has also come with major social problems, such as caring for the needs of vulnerable populations (e.g., the mentally and physically handicapped and orphans).

Historically, South Korea was hesitant to welcome back KADs or even acknowledge their existence until the 1990s when they realized that they could no longer hide the foreign adoptions that had been tagged by Korean media as a national shame (Volkman 2005: 187). Thus, the government discourse changed to be pro-KADs, and efforts were made to handle the adoption issue in a more positive way.

Identity Formation

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines identity as “sameness of essential or generic character in different instances.” While this definition is a representation in comprehensive English, having similar “generic character” does not even scratch the surface of the variability that words and the concepts associated with them carry: “knowledges have cultural foundations on the basis of which they are formed” (Kondo 1990: 28). Therefore, while South Korean and American cultures each have particular words to represent the concept of identity, the formation of the meanings produced can be different.

A KAD’s identity formation process may be complicated by two different types of identity attributed to adoptees from transracial families: there is one’s ethnic identity and their personal identity, which do not always coexist. For instance, as a KAD, my ethnic identity can be defined as belonging to South Koreans, a people who presumably share a common heritage and phenotype. My personal identity is a response to my ethnic identity and has been independent of my supposed allegiance to my ethnic group. In the U.S. many recognize me as Korean first, and it seemed clear that I was perceived as a native Korean while abroad. The reality is that I do not possess Korean cultural knowledge, nor was I raised in the country, yet, I am assumed to represent that ethnic group. I have attempted to form my own personal identity in spite of my ethnicity within an American context. However, I soon learned that, in a Korean context, the two could not remain mutually exclusive.

Two additional factors can complicate a KAD’s identity formation before they even embark upon their journey to their birth country. In the United States, Asians are perpetually seen as foreigners, as well as “honorary whites” (i.e., unlike white ethnics, non-white ethnics cannot assimilate completely even over generations due to physical differences) (Shiao and Tuan 2008: 1025). Additionally, growing up in a transracial family can create identity confusion since many adoptees relate to the dominant adopted culture, rather than to their heritage. In a study conducted at the University of Oregon on adult KADs, the researchers found that American society characterizes KADs as “Asian” and not “American” (Shiao and Tuan 2008: 1025). These findings reflect the dyadic existence of KADs whereby they are seen as foreigners and “honorary whites” simultaneously (Shiao and Tuan 2008: 1025).

Other studies have also found that adoptees are most likely to identify with their adoptive family’s ethnic group, rather than their own ethnic group (Soon Huh and Reid 2000: 76). When reflecting upon my own experiences and the experiences of other KAD volunteers while abroad, I found this to be generally true among transracial families.

For example, phenotypic confusion—why do I look Asian when I feel Caucasian like my parents?—is an example of how one’s ethnic identity can diverge from their personal identity. The level of identification varies depending on how culturally diverse a family decides to be. Many adoptive parents may not see race or ethnicity as a barrier and they may deemphasize the phenotypic differences (Soon Huh and Reid 2000: 75), which can lead to a complete rejection of a KAD’s birth heritage or apprehension about being a part of it. Personal identity formation for KADs can be difficult to reconcile in an American context, and many hope to address this issue upon their return to their birth country. However, my field experience will illustrate how this confusion is often not eradicated, but instead augmented, upon return to the birth country.

Government Discourse: Re-education, Preservation, and Economic Prosperity

There are multiple reasons why South Korea would want to finally shed light on their relationship with adoption and would want adoptees to return. These include economic and political ties, preservation of Korean tradition, and pride. These reasons do not seem completely altruistic, however, and the conflict of purpose has clearly contributed to the complication of the KAD’s experience as they search for a sense of belonging while abroad. South Korea states that it wants to encourage returning adoptee assimilation through re-education programs, but the government’s actions seem to show more concern about economic and political growth.

As South Korea emerged from the devastation of the Korean-American War, President Seung-Man Lee was highly supportive of the idea of foreign adoption law. As Lee explicitly stated, he wanted to solve the problem of interracial orphans by finding non-Korean homes for biracial children (cited in Lee 2005: 124). Given South Korea’s conservatism and adherence to Confucianism, keeping a child that was not fully Korean was seen by Korean society as ludicrous, which emphasizes the prevailing notion that adoption was an embarrassment for all involved. The ultimate goal was to preserve filial, rather than fictive relationships (i.e., relationships that are not based upon blood), and also to deter people from contaminating the Korean blood with that of foreigners.

When evaluating the evolution of the South Korean social welfare system, it is apparent that the government has revamped the structure and the goals numerous times as the country continues to develop. As in the 1950s, there are currently many private institutions (e.g., Holt Children’s Services) and voluntary service groups in South Korea that run social services, such as orphanages, homes for the disabled, and adoption agencies. From the 1960s to the 1970s, the South Korean government chose to invest in

military expansion and economic growth rather than in social welfare programs. Consequently, many programs could not be implemented, which put more stress on foreign aid and civil organizations to provide voluntary services for orphans, the poor, and the elderly. It was not until the late 1970s that the country began to construct proper social welfare policy (Lee 2005: 195). In theory, this decreased the need for private organizations in South Korea. However, many of the child welfare centers that were built in response to policy change were turned into places for mentally or physically handicapped people, which only increased the need for international adoption.

In 2010, South Korea was ranked 28th out of the 29 OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries based upon how much of its gross domestic product (GDP) was spent on social welfare. At only 10.95%, the nation was ranked just above Mexico (Korea Times). As history has illustrated, South Korea reacts to economic downturn by opening up the international adoption gates, preferring to hide current social problems rather than to publicly admit their faults.

Another contributing factor to this continual denial is that the South Korean government has historically viewed adoption from a Confucian perspective. Hence, the topic of adoption remained an embarrassing “secret” until the 1988 Olympics when they were internationally criticized for exporting their “greatest natural resource,” their children (Volkman 2005: 57). The result was that by the 1990s, the South Korean government’s policies and discourse on adoption had changed drastically towards a positive foreign perspective—but for whose gain?

A second turning point in Korean government discourse was when the president of South Korea, Kim Dae Jung, gave a formal apology to four hundred Korean-born adoptees at a ceremony in Washington, DC in 1999. He not only openly addressed the public stigma of adoption in South Korea for the first time, but he also embraced adoptees as “Overseas Koreans” who would bridge the gap “between the country of birth and the present country of citizenship” (Volkman 2005: 63). While being the “bridge” between one’s birth country and adoptive country seems like a beautiful gesture, the drive behind this reconnection seems highly based upon global gain: through KADS, South Korea would create more foreign ties and receive foreign dollars by way of returning adoptees.

Despite public education campaigns and public policy implementation in South Korea, native Koreans generally still pity adoptees for their lack of Korean kin ties. This feeling of pity suggests that there is still a disconnect between the sentiments the government hopes to project and the perspective of the public. Ultimately, the previous examples illustrate that the change in government

perspective on adoption and adoptees was not necessarily influenced by a new social perspective. Rather, change occurred due to the fact that South Korea could benefit from newfound connections with foreign Korean adoptees and their respective countries, and thereby allow the government to perhaps save face. As a country based upon the Confucian value of respect for thy nation, changes in government discourse could cleanse the nation's name of past embarrassment.

The Korean government also attempted to implement more policies and programs that directly influence returning KADs and the adoption community. It is debatable whether or not they are positive or negative. For example, the Adoption Quota Policy states that only a certain amount of foreign adoptions can occur within a year and by certain agencies (Lee 2005: 198). As a prominent organization, Holt Children's Services (HCS) can conduct a significant amount of adoptions. However, HCS must carefully track how many adoptions are being processed considering that the government continues to decrease the number of children allowed to be sent abroad by 3-5% each year (interview with Molly Holt: September, 2011). This places a tremendous amount of pressure on agencies to create innovative ways to deal with the number of orphans already waiting to be adopted while juggling the influx of new orphans daily.

Although South Korea's plan is to get rid of the need for foreign adoption, the plan has yet to succeed due to the lack of interest in domestic adoption. In response, the government continues to campaign for domestic adoption by offering tax incentives and family benefits. This demonstrates the lack of agreement between public and government discourse and the continuous adherence to Confucian ideology.

From the 1990s onward, globalization was in full force and differing perspectives were expressed: Frances Cairncross, a British economist and journalist, stated that "the communications revolution is profoundly democratic and liberating, leveling the imbalance between large and small, rich and poor; the death of distance... should be welcomed and enjoyed" (cited in Volkman 2005: 185). The idea is that the fluidity of national borders increases multiculturalism and makes us all a part of a "global village." Despite these romantic notions, globalization seems to have only hardened South Korean national identity, the complete opposite of what Cairncross has envisioned. As an example, in her article titled *Three-week Re-education to Koreaness*, Elise Preblin a Ph.D in Korean anthropology, recalled when globalization was announced as an "unstoppable economic new order that would diminish national identities and culture" (2008: 324). In the 1990s, the president at the time, Kim Young Sam, took this to heart and saw globalization as only an

economic opportunity, "We cannot be global citizens without a good understanding of our own culture and tradition," meaning, that for whatever foreign influences were placed upon South Korea, they would contest it with equal force in the form of nationalism (Preblin 2008: 325).

To ensure the survival of South Korean traditions and values, the Korean government created the Overseas Korean Foundation (OKF) with two goals in mind: to keep the Korean authentic identity intact and to re-educate returning KADs (Preblin 2008: 325). Preblin believes that while these programs have been created in the hopes of combating the negative aspects of globalization from inside the country, they also serve to attract KADs back to the country. In this sense, international adoptees are seen as Koreans of the diaspora (i.e., the dispersion of Koreans from their homeland) and need re-education to discover their "true identity" (2008: 323).

Despite the level of knowledge that returning adoptees had about their adoption history or birth country, Preblin believed that cultural programs, especially OKF, depended less on shared belief and agreement and more on the appropriate orchestration and action of the program. This illustrates that the focus is on aesthetically, but not actually, showing one's "Koreaness," which creates an illusory sense of belonging. Programs like OKF are founded upon the notion of South Korean culturalism, which is based upon the idea that adoptees have physical and genetic predisposition to be and behave like native Koreans (Preblin 2008: 326). The adoptee's identity is directly confronted during these programs and the adoptee is compelled to demonstrate their "Koreaness," therefore, clearly demonstrating a misunderstanding between how an adoptee perceives their own identity and how they are expected to act within a Korean context.

Reflecting upon my own experiences as well as those of fellow KAD volunteers, programs designed for returning adoptees often create a more defined separation between native Koreans and themselves: "these rituals have a valid purpose although they lead not to integration but to separation: defining the diaspora continues to rely on defining what is outside the national territory" (Preblin 2008: 323). For example, a fellow returning KAD had participated in a cultural program with the goal of re-education and stated that the program was full of traditional activities, such as a tea ceremony, a mock wedding, a Hangul and language class, and visits to the Folk Village, the Blue House, and various palaces. The program was designed to introduce adoptees to the Korean culture and a diploma of sorts was presented at the completion of the program. The fact that these traditional events are not found in everyday Korean life serves to forge a deeper connection between adoptees' and their heritage. It is as if the government is setting a

precondition, which is that to be truly Korean and formally accepted, one must experience things that are truly unique to South Korea. These re-education programs are, therefore, not created with the KAD solely in mind, but with the intention of teaching what it means to be “Korean.”

The F4 Visa is another way that South Korea has tried to decrease the need for adoption while creating an illusory sense of acceptance for returning adoptees. The “Act on Entry/Exit and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans” was passed in September 1999 and put into effect that December. “It grants Overseas Korean Nationals, who have established residency in a foreign country, and Foreign National Koreans who once had Korean citizenship, virtually all the same legal rights as Korean nationals. Overseas adult adoptees are among those who can benefit from this act,” according to the guidelines provided by the Seoul Immigration Office and prepared by Dae-Won Wenger and Nicole Sheppard of Global Overseas Adoptees’ Link (G.O.A.’L). However, this act was not established with the intent of including Korean adoptees. Adoptees were only included after G.O.A.’L lobbied for the inclusion of the group.¹ This act has been publicized as a way for adoptees to truly become native; however, the F4 Visa only lasts for two years, which can give an adoptee a false sense of identity and belonging in the meantime.

Upon closer inspection, I have discovered that many of my own experiences resonate with what Preblin observed. I did feel like many of the events that I participated in stressed action over the emotional connection. For example, I often went to different types of traditional ceremonies while abroad, and, obviously, they were conducted in the Korean language. I never knew what they were saying, but I could figure out the context and mimic what everyone else was doing by watching their facial expressions and gestures. The fact that I was present was good enough for all involved, and they felt that I was actually participating in Korean culture, despite the fact that I would usually sit there frustrated because I never got the subtle jokes or the sentimental comments.

I felt the need to pretend to be a part of the whole and that it was not appropriate to show my “Americanness.” While in Korea, I was expected to be Korean and to be proud of my heritage no matter how superficial my connection. I do not deny that I made connections with wonderful native Koreans, but the experience only

¹ G.O.A.’L is a non-profit organization and a NGO consisting of overseas Korean adoptees and native Koreans working together to locate birth families and experience Korean life

confirmed the differences between my birthplace and my sense of self. Rather than re-education, the experiences created a frustrating situation in which certain things were expected of me and I was not able to meet those expectations.

While these cultural programs along with the F4 Visa seem like genuine gestures from the Korean government, it is difficult to see their actions as entirely altruistic. As a KAD, I do not see these new policies and cultural programs as long term solutions in regards to addressing the real problem. They are merely a peace offering that aligns with the nation’s intention to show that they had not completely overlooked their “forgotten children.” These programs portray an air of showmanship, and it seems they are truly concerned with saving face and adhering to Confucianism as South Korea continues to modernize. The Adoption Quota Policy seems like a move in a positive direction, towards a future where adoption is unnecessary. The idea, however, has been romanticized since the inception of international adoption and it is not a logical answer in view of the current public discourse. Society is not ready to overlook Confucian ideology. We should question what Korean policies and programs say about the country’s modernization, and how the current government perspective on returning adoptees and international adoption affect an adoptee’s sense of belonging upon their return.

In sum, the elusiveness of the South Korean Foreign Adoption Policy illustrates the tension between the state’s adherence to tradition and its desire for modernity. The result is that KADs are stuck in the middle; we are not native and we are not foreigners. This creates a complex situation where KADs must attempt to find their own sense of belonging while trying to adhere to their personal identity molded by their respective culture and, simultaneously, meet certain Korean expectations.

My Own Sense of Belonging in South Korea

Throughout my trip, I went from being someone who questioned their identity and struggled with their dyadic existence in the context of American culture, to finally, being someone who now better understands the complexity of their situation and does not feel compelled to decide between being Korean or American.

In Victor Turner’s essay, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*,” he states that the rite of passage is present in all societies and consists of transitions between states or what he calls physical, emotional, or mental conditions (1964: 46). Noting the works of Arnold van Gennep, the first anthropologist to study the transitional stages that take place in a person’s life, Turner conceptualizes the rite of passage as being

composed of three phases: separation, transformation, and reincorporation. The first phase, separation, signifies the detachment of the individual or group from their previous cultural conditions (e.g., status or location) (Turner 1964: 46-47). During the transformation phase, the individual goes through a state of ambiguity with “few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (Turner 1964: 47). With the third phase, or reincorporation, the passage is completed, and the individual has returned to a “stable state.” The expectations and obligations have changed, however, and are clearly defined, and the individual is “expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards” (Turner 1964:47).

In light of both van Gennep’s and Turner’s work, I perceive my own experience abroad as a rite of passage. In the first stage, I was forced into a different culture with different notions of identity and kinship, and I came face-to-face with my dyadic existence. I went from having to convince Americans that I was more American rather than Korean, to convincing Koreans that I was more Korean and not American. In the second stage, I not only had to learn how to be more Korean, but I also had to learn how to be a Korean adoptee within a Confucian system of thinking. In the United States, adoption is perceived positively. In South Korea, however, adoption continues to be viewed negatively, whether it is domestic or international. Thus, my return went directly against many Confucian notions: I was born out of wedlock to a single mother, therefore I do not have a Korean family to call my own, and I was adopted outside of the country. Consequently, I felt compelled to illustrate my “Koreaness,” just as I feel obligated to show my “Americaness” while at home. It was clear that a KAD can never be Korean enough, only too American, and a KAD’s notion of identity is constantly being negotiated depending on whose presence we find ourselves in. I had to transition from being a KAD who questioned their personal and ethnic identity in an American context to trying to locate my sense of belonging in a context that had a difficult time accepting me.

In the final stage, I transitioned into a position wherein I have come to better understand the complexity of my situation. I feel surprisingly less obligated to decide between being exclusively Korean or American. I have also come to terms with the fact that my ethnic identity and my personal identity do not have to be mutually exclusive. Rather than being defensive about my heritage, I have learned how to embrace that aspect of my identity. The most significant thing I learned from this process is that my identity will always be reconfiguring and in constant flux between my “Americaness” and my “Koreaness.”

Conclusion

Eleana Kim, a prolific ethnographer of adoption and adoptees, discusses in her article, “Wedding Citizenship and Culture: Korean Adoptees and The Global Family of Korea,” how KADs hold a very unique space within the “fourth culture”: an adoptee is not a part of the Korean culture, nor that of American. In fact, he or she is not even part of the Korean American immigrant culture. People who were born in South Korea, raised in America and are adoptees have been forced to create a cultural space that is uniquely their own (2003: 65). Indeed, this conceptualization of the KAD aptly reflects my own experience abroad.

I went to South Korea in search of more knowledge about the country and my dyadic existence. I undertook a physical journey that transformed the way I feel about adoption in the context of Korean culture, and I did not return empty handed. It was an intellectual and emotional journey as well, resulting in a different understanding of my identity. My goal in this paper has been to illustrate the complexity of a KAD’s return to South Korea in the context of the current government and public spheres. I want to demonstrate that such a journey does not always fill a void or answer all of one’s questions: it can be confusing, difficult, and emotionally straining. I now realize that the adoptee condition is unique, and despite the trials and tribulations that I have encountered in both American and Korean contexts, I am now proud to call myself a KAD. *Dr. Isidore Lobnibe served as faculty sponsor for this article’s submission to PURE Insights.*

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