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Sense of Belonging: A Korean American Adoptee's Return to South Korea

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Sense of Belonging: A Korean American Adoptee's Return to South Korea

By

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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[Abstract]

Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, over 150,000 South Korean children have been adopted by American and European families. Those in the U.S. are often referred to as KADs or Korean American adoptees. Utilizing participant observation and interviews conducted in South Korea, I examine how Confucian ideology, which stresses consanguineal relations, has directly affected the ways in which the Korean government and society view KADs and adoption and, consequently, shape the expectations placed upon KADs in a Korean context. I argue that KADs experience identity confusion and identity reconfiguration in the search for a sense of belonging in a country that has historically been ashamed of them.

[The Dilemma of Being Betwixt and Between]

Two months into my South Korean trip, the culture shock had finally worn off, and I longed to be around English speakers, to eat a cheeseburger with fries, and ultimately, to be in a setting where I felt completely comfortable. Up until that point, everything was a new experience and it was exhilarating, but eventually, constant change became less exciting and more stressful. I wanted to do something or go somewhere that would be familiar: what better place to go than the International District in Seoul. The other volunteers, also Korean American adoptees, and I dressed in our best clothing and headed off to see *The Importance of Being Earnest*, one of my favorite plays. The crew and the actors were from England, and we were ecstatic about being around people who could not only understand us, but whom we could understand. An hour before the play, the audience began to fill in the chairs: the crowd was composed of Americans and a few Australians.

One of the things that I missed most while abroad was the ability to have small talk and, I admit, to eavesdrop on conversations. Even though, in eavesdropping, I was not directly talking to a person, I no longer felt alone in a crowd. Interestingly though, but I suppose not surprisingly, since we were in a district that many natives did not venture to, we were the only Koreans in the room. I felt completely comfortable with my surroundings for the first time while abroad; nonetheless, something felt different. The other volunteers and I confirmed that while we believed that we fit in perfectly, it was apparent that we were seen as the “other.” While being “othered” is not foreign to KADs in either an American or Korean context, it is a reminder that we are indefinitely placed within a liminal space. For example, we may feel American in the U.S.; however, other people may not perceive us the same way: usually, we are questioned about our ethnicity,

where we were born, and who our parents are. There was no exception while abroad: natives perceived us as fellow Koreans while we felt completely estranged; in other words, independent of location, we are continuously questioned and are expected to fill different roles; In America, we are assumed to be foreigners, and in South Korea, we are assumed to be natives - betwixt and between.

How does a person reconcile differing identities when one feels a certain way, but is perceived in another? I continuously felt like I was fighting a losing battle, and I was forced to face my dyadic existence: am I Korean? Am I American? Am I allowed to be both? These were questions that I struggled with throughout my time in South Korea, and I realized that identity reconfiguration was the only way to obtain a sense of belonging; I could no longer deny my confusion; I had to finally address the question of “who am I?”



["Diedra" written in Hangul]

[Chapter One]

Introduction

In this ethnography, I examined how Confucian ideology, which stresses consanguineal relations, has directly affected the perspectives of the Korean government and society. I will 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 and kinship in an American context, and how they are expected to be in a Korean context results in identity confusion, identity reconfiguration, and ultimately, the hopeful establishment of a sense of belonging in a country that has historically been ashamed of them.

In light of this dilemma, it is essential to address the inception of international adoption in South Korea and how historical problems have necessitated the need for this social service. The supplementation of historical knowledge will not only aid in a better understanding of the current situation of adoption within the country, more importantly, it will also demonstrate how Confucian ideology has created a negative atmosphere due to differing notions of who Koreans are, what family is, and expectations for KADs in a Korean context; therefore, it is crucial that I explain the variance between the American and South Korean notions of identity and demonstrate how identity formation is unique to this population. Next, I will discuss my positionality as a KAD and an anthropologist. This will better situate myself within my work so the reader understands my perspective on this phenomenon based upon history and traditional ideology; it will also describe my anthropological perspective on a situation that is my reality.

The Unspoken History of Adoption in South Korea

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), children who were conceived by Korean women and U.S. or 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 non-agnate adoptions all together (Volkman 2005: 58).

Since the Joseon Dynasty (circa 1392), South Korea has utilized 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, and filial piety is one of the greatest Confucian virtues, which does not condone adoption of those who are not of the same bloodline. Confucianism is also based upon a social hierarchal system, which elicits the respect that a child or person should show based upon hierarchal tiers. First, one must honor thy country, then thy parents; not only does this ideology produce an analogous and physical distance between tiers in the name of respect, it also stresses the emphasis on nationalism and preserving tradition.

From 1954 onward, the adoption of children from South Korea [the “sending” country] and the United States of America [the “receiving” country] has become so popular that over 150,000 South Korean children have been 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

and established Holt International Children's Services (HICS) in 1956 (Volkman 2005: 56). Since the 1960s, South Korea has also industrialized at such a rapid rate that it is difficult to see where they may be lacking as a country. While the country has managed to turn itself into a modernized nation, such rapid progress has created major social problems and caring for the needs of vulnerable populations, such as orphans, remains a challenge.

Although South Korea has historically been hesitant to welcome back KADs or even acknowledge their existence, in the 1990s they realized that they could no longer hide this national shame. Thus, the government discourse changed to pro-KADs and they decided to handle the adoption issue in a more positive way. Nonetheless, the South Korean public discourse has remained less openly accepting.

Identity Formation

Before discussing government and public discourse, I will first discuss the different notions of identity and kinship in an American context versus a South Korean context to contextualize the reconfiguration process that occurs once a KAD returns



[Harry and Bertha Holt arriving in the U.S. with 8 adopted children]

home. I will also illustrate various factors that may affect the identity formation process among such a unique population.

In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, identity is defined as “sameness of essential or generic character in different instances.” While this definition is supposedly a representation in comprehensive English, I will use an example to demonstrate how words and the concepts associated with them are culture dependent. At some point, a child will learn how to add simple numbers, such as $1+1=2$; however, the process of coming to that conclusion, as well as learning what “2” means to them, may vary: “knowledges have cultural foundations on the basis of which they are formed” (Kondo 1990: 28). Therefore, while South Korean and American cultures both have a particular word to represent the concept of identity, the formation of the meanings produced will be different.

The American understanding of these words is based upon a notion of individualistic values: a person can decide who and what they are without the consensus of the group (however, I do acknowledge that there are social influences) and individualism is admired within this culture. Adoption, in general, is also seen as a positive phenomenon in the U.S.—often times it is seen as a Humanitarian act, which can be seen as positive or negative; but either way, adoptees are accepted, because American culture wants to encourage diversity: it is okay to be a part of a transracial family. At the end of this section, I will contrast the American notion with that of the South Korean, but I will first discuss certain factors that may complicate a KAD’s identity formation process.

Two factors may complicate a KADs identity formation before they even embark upon their journey to their birth country. First, in the United States, Asians are perpetually seen as foreigners as well as “honorary whites;” and, second, growing up in a transracial family can create identity confusion, since many adoptees relate to the dominant adopted culture, rather than to their ethnic heritage. In a study conducted by students at the University of Oregon among a group of adult KADs, they noted that American society characterizes KADs as Asian, not necessarily American in the way that we consider the majority of whites to be—it is almost a privilege to be considered American (Shiao and Tuan 2008: 1025).

Some studies have also found that adoptees are more likely to identify with their adoptive family’s ethnic group, rather than their own (Soon Huh and Reid 2000: 76). When reflecting upon the experiences of the other KADs discussed in this ethnography and my own experiences, I found this to be generally true among transracial families. For example, we have all experienced phenotypic confusion; why do we look Korean when we feel Caucasian like our parents? The level of identification will also vary depending on how culturally diverse a family decides to be. While many adoptive parents may not see race or ethnicity as a barrier, they may deemphasize the phenotypic differences (Soon Huh and Reid 2000: 75), which may lead to a complete rejection of a KADs birth heritage or apprehension about being a part of it.

I also argue that there can be two different types of identity found among adoptees from transracial families as a result of the previously mentioned factors. There is one’s ethnic identity and their personal identity, which do not always coexist. My ethnic identity can be defined as my identification with a group, South Koreans, that share a

common heritage and, presumably, phenotype. While my personal identity is a response to my ethnic identity, I refer to it as independent of my supposed allegiance to my ethnic group. For example, many recognize me as Korean in the U.S. and it was blaringly clear while abroad; however, I do not possess cultural knowledge, nor was I raised in South Korea, and I do not consider myself to be Korean; it is merely assumed that I represent that ethnic group. I have attempted to form my own personal identity in spite of my ethnicity within an American context, which I have recognized as a rejection of my ethnicity. However, I soon learned that in a Korean context, the two could not remain exclusive; this phenomenon will be discussed in the final chapter.

As previously stated, it is important to acknowledge how unique identity formation can be among KADs; however, that will not be the focus of this paper; it is merely a reference point for the reader. Personal identity formation for KADs can be difficult to obtain in an American context where they must face their dyadic existence—I look Korean, but feel Caucasian and American. Upon one's return to their birth country, this confusion is not eradicated, but instead augmented. One's ethnic identity will play a bigger role in how one associates with the people and the culture. I will focus on how a KAD identifies him or herself before returning to their birth country and how that notion is reconfigured while abroad, using myself as an example of a returning KAD who is searching for their sense of belonging.

In contrast to the American notion, South Korean identity is understood as and flows from collective values. For example, pride (saving face), image, and family trump the wants and needs of the individual; everything that is done is done in response to how it will affect and reflect the group and, ultimately, the nation. The differing ideologies

and understandings of identity between the sending and receiving countries will help explain the identity confusion that KADs may face and how they are stuck in a liminal space: they are not exclusively natives or foreigners, and they are continuously pulled in two directions. To fully understand how a KAD's identity may be affected in the context of Korean culture, it is important to look at the root of not only identity formation in South Korea, but also at how it is enforced—and I have found the answer to be Confucianism. Not only does this ideology seem to be the main reason for the inception of international adoption and the lack of interest in domestic adoption, it is also an ideology that underlines the Korean culture altogether. Confucianism affects how people perceive themselves within a Korean cultural context, how people interact, and more specifically, how KADs are treated and how they form their own sense of belonging while abroad. Confucianism also encourages Korean homogeneity—passing on the Korean heritage and Korean bloodlines, which is based upon the assumption that consanguineal or filial relations are stronger than adoptive relations. Now with a general sense of identity formation among this unique population, I will now direct the attention to my own positionality as a KAD and an anthropologist with the belief that to objectively analyze a piece of work, a person should know through what means that information was generated.

Theoretical Framework

When I began writing up my field data, I had no idea what type of voice or from which theoretical angle to pursue or frame my analysis; nor did I anticipate that my field research was going to evolve in a completely different direction. In fact, my original senior project proposal had sought to look at family reaffirmation among transracial

families, which ultimately changed to the study of returning KADs to their birth country in South Korea. Upon arrival in the country, I was immediately confronted with an enduring epistemological question, namely the tension between pure objectivity and subjectivity in fieldwork. Given my positionality or social location as a returning KAD, this was a difficult question to resolve.

In this section, I will discuss whether or not native anthropology is an appropriate approach for this ethnography versus a reflexive theoretical framework. Drawing inspiration from the insights of Sonia Ryang and various other opinions about reflexivity and native anthropology, I will address concerns about native biases and authenticity, and whether there is even a place for reflexivity in anthropology.

Kirsten Hastrup noted that it is impossible to be a native and an anthropologist at the same time (cited in Ryang 1997: 30). In her view, knowledge must be constructed objectively and be reflected upon so as to become valued theoretically and historically; objectivity for a native is therefore unobtainable (Ryang 1997: 30). Throughout my research on KADs in South Korea I have been called a native anthropologist numerous times and never once questioned the validity of this title. Certain things are apparent: I am a KAD who was born in South Korea, but was raised in the United States. My interest in international adoption and South Korea did not develop until college, and moreover I look Korean, but do not feel Korean. If simply analyzed, the return “home” could imply that my role as a native anthropologist was legitimate (i.e., conducting work in one’s home country or province), because I was among fellow Koreans. However, upon closer analysis, I have discovered that this title cannot be taken for granted.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a native as a person born in a specific place or associated with a place by birth, whether or not they continue to be a resident. Thus, it is implied that a native would possess cultural knowledge to the point that it can be considered personal knowledge (i.e., knowledge that is obtained through firsthand experience); and an anthropologist is someone who studies human cultures through a scientific lens, most notably through an objective lens. The question of what native anthropology meant to me did not actually become important until I began my fieldwork in the fall of 2011 when I discovered the impossibility of pure objectivity given my positionality as both an anthropologist and a KAD. I saw myself as an anthropologist first and then the conglomerate of other things second. It was important to not only discover my own identity within the context of South Korean culture, but also how Korean people identified me within their own culture given that the Korean notion of identity is derived largely from biological filiation. It was for this reason that I have embraced reflexivity as a crucial tool in this study. Rather than a hindrance, I view my own perspective as a KAD as a unique opportunity to bring to the preexisting body of work on adoption a more intimate perspective on the KAD population and to present the return to one's birth country as something that is personal and unique for each individual, rather than as something that can be quantified.

While I do not claim that native anthropology does not exist, my personal experience in the field has shown that it can be difficult to balance being a native and an anthropologist simultaneously. The only way that I felt like I could achieve such a task was by using subjective tools to achieve objectivity. During my fieldwork, I was forced to examine what my role was to be, and I saw myself as a foreigner first and foremost,

while my nativeness was definitely location and group dependent. If one is put in this situation, it can humble the anthropologist and place them in a position of equality among all subjects. Never did I feel entitled to an authoritative voice as a native, nor did I assume that objectivity was always possible; it was a process of self-realization. Consequently, I would not describe myself as a native anthropologist, but as a reflexive KAD, which means that I acknowledge my own subjectivity in my work.

Taking a reflexive analytical lens, versus titling my work as native anthropology in this study, allows me to not pigeon hole myself as exclusively a native who may have biases working with their “own people”, nor does it present my work as if it was by default “authentic,” because I am a part of my subject group. However, I do not deny that it may have been easier to become an “insider” or “go native,” but that did not make my job as an anthropologist any easier. In fact, immediately being “accepted” into a culture based upon merely phenotypic traits had negative effects (McClaurin 1996: 14); Once it was discovered that I was not actually a native Korean, I could not live up to certain expectations placed upon me, and this made it difficult to assume the role of anthropologist. Thus, while a native anthropologist may become an insider much more quickly, there will always be obstacles that any fieldworker will encounter, Finally, any human being can encounter biases, and the realization of them can assist a person in understanding their position in their work and among their subject group, resulting in a more enlightened product.

For example, in her article on North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology, and Identity, Ryang (2005) noted that she was criticized for not publishing her ethnography in Japanese even though English is her written and spoken language (Ryang 2005: 147), but

the fact that she was seen as a native produced those expectations. Not only must native ethnographers be hyper sensitive about how subjects are going to perceive their work, they must also consider the public, since many often assume what the ethnographer writes to be true (Ryang 1997: 32); as Ryang puts it, authenticity is “not the monopoly of natives or native anthropologists” (2005: 154). A few remarks about my ethnic identity are also in order. I was returning to my birth country, and by default it was an emotional experience. Thus, I became an author who could comment on social issues and who wrote through the lens of a KAD and not merely as an objective bystander. While I do not believe that my work is representative of the entire KAD population, I do want to contribute an insider’s perspective from true inspiration, and I believe that writing as an author rather than a writer who remains purely objective will accomplish this.

Along with the debate over the pros and cons of native anthropology, there is also debate over the reflexive turn in anthropology. From one perspective, there are those who argue that it is selfish on the part of the anthropologist to insert him or herself into their writing, and that it is more important to talk about people in the field. Some anthropologists also do not feel comfortable utilizing this type of writing, because they have not obtained wider recognition and do not want to expose their vulnerability (Ryang 2005: 154). As Ryang stated, “this choice has moral and political implications because it is a metamorphosis, knowledge being transferred from a non-dominant position into a position of dominance” (Ryang 2005: 153). In other words, that information is being transformed into knowledge that will not only be seen as authentic, but also disseminated. Therefore, it was imperative to ask myself why some anthropologists write reflexively,

while others do not, and, ultimately, why I chose to write reflexively after considering the previous arguments.

In response to the concerns of many anthropologists, native and non-natives, the fact that I am explicitly a part of the subject pool I chose allowed me to supplement the stories of other subjects with my own, which helped me connect with my audience as not just a researcher, but more importantly a human being. As a KAD, I see the importance of telling our stories and educating the public about something that affects a large portion of the U.S. population. In comparison to Ryang, who was apprehensive of describing herself in detail (Ryang 2005: 153), I believe in the importance of reflexivity in the field of anthropology. I want to encourage others to consider using this technique in any discipline. While it is of utmost importance to learn about the subject group, it is also important to know where the information is being generated and through what means.

The following will now outline the rest of this ethnography and investigation of identity and sense of belonging. In the second chapter, I will illustrate my fieldwork by describing who my subjects were, what the purpose of my project was, where and when I conducted my fieldwork, and why I chose South Korea. To deepen my analysis, I will then demonstrate how Confucian ideology has affected the Korean government's perspective on KADs and international adoption by focusing on general discourse, policies, and government-funded programs for KADs in the third chapter. Currently, South Korea is focusing on the acceptance of KADs through re-education programs and the removal of international adoption with the Adoption Quota Policy; however, through the lens of a KAD, their newfound perspective seems to be less altruistic and more of an economic and political move. South Korea has been criticized in the past for neglecting

KADs, and as they industrialize, it has become necessary to face their shameful past, which has clearly created a clash between traditional ideology and modernity.

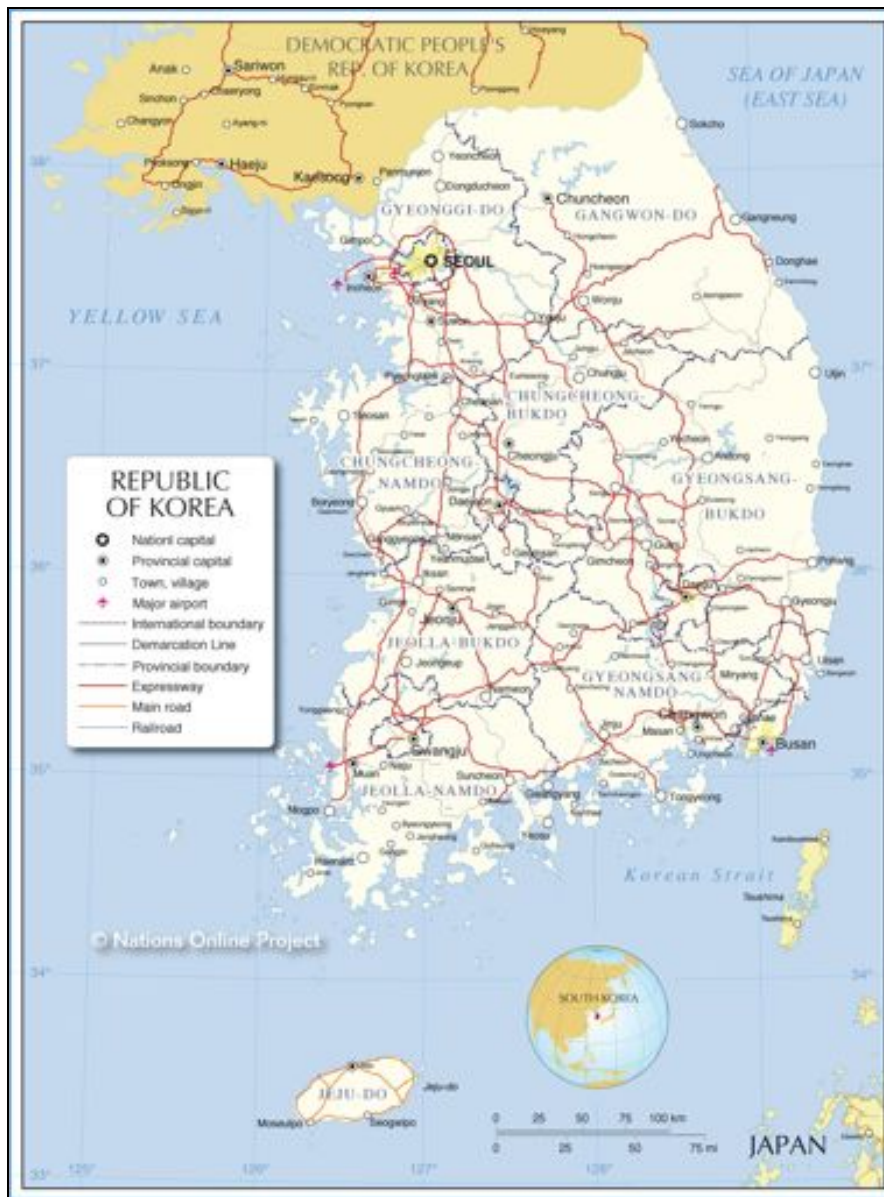
In the fourth chapter, I will discuss public discourse on KADs and international and domestic adoption through the lens of a KAD. As previously mentioned, the government discourse has become pro-KAD; however, public discourse has hardly changed and remains driven by Confucian ideology. As a result, there are very strong expectations placed upon returning KADs, which are fueled not only by traditional notions of familial relations, but also by popular media. By evaluating the perspectives of the Korean government and society regarding this population, I will illustrate the complexity of obtaining a sense of belonging after KADs return to their birth country.

Lastly, I will conclude this ethnography by discussing how Confucian ideology compelled me to reconfigure my identity, and I will examine the difficulty of trying to find my sense of belonging while abroad. By discussing this in terms of rite of passage, I will illustrate how I transformed throughout this process as a representative of returning KADs. I hope to demonstrate that this journey is not what people expect to be, it is full of confusion and emotional strain; however, in the end, it will always be something that is remembered for better or for worse.

[Chapter Two]

Research Methodology

The research for this study was conducted over a period of three months in Gyeonggi-do, South Korea in the district of Ilsan, where I volunteered at the Ilsan Center for disabled adoptees. Initially, I was searching for internships in South Korea, which did



not produce fruitful results. Eventually, I decided to call upon HICS located in Eugene, Oregon for help. They said that they did not offer any internship for confidentiality reasons, but Holt Children's Services (HCS), which is run by the headquarters in Seoul, did offer

a one to three month volunteer opportunity at the center. This program was supplemented with five terms of research on international adoption and KAD identity in Oregon. While

abroad, I explored questions related to international adoption, race and ethnicity, KAD identity, and Korean culture and social norms by conducting participant observation and interviews with Holt staff.

I volunteered at the Ilsan Center from September 26 – December 7, 2011, working closely with disabled adoptees, housemothers, and the on-site staff. In 1961, Harry and Bertha Holt founded the center in hopes of creating a safe place for Korean orphans who had yet to be placed in homes because of medical and developmental conditions. The Ilsan Center has since become a “world-renowned residential facility specializing in the care of people with disabilities” (Holt International Adoption website). Currently, the center is a safe place for orphans with disabilities to live, and at times they are rehabilitated to the point that they can be adopted as special needs. However, more often than not, residents remain at the center their entire life. While on-site, I met orphans who ranged from infants to over sixty years old who had a spectrum of disabilities (e.g., mental, emotional, and physical). There are over three hundred residents currently in the center and the residents are divided into rooms, not by age, but by level of mental capability. Each room is overseen by a housemother who works a twelve-hour



[An amazing housemother who worked in Molly's House]

shift and then trades off with the relief housemother. Just as the name implies, these women are much more than just caregivers, they are the only mother figure that most of these orphans will ever encounter; therefore, the bonds that are forged are strong and meaningful for better or for worse. However, the ratio between housemother and residents is usually 1:10 or more, which is why volunteers are crucial. My daily routine consisted of two-hour activity sessions, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. During these sessions the other two volunteers and I went from room to room



[Lydia and a resident at the local park in Ilsan]

undertaking activities which ranged from going on walks, coloring, playing music, going to the park, anything that was stimulating. We also took three residents to E-Mart (similar to Wal-Mart) once a week to

not only purchase food supplies, but to also expose residents to what was outside of the gates and partake in activities that people often take for granted. Each resident was able to use their own money to purchase anything from coffee to DVDs. Afterwards, we treated ourselves to a traditional Korean meal in the food court.

While residents benefited from the E-Mart trips, it was not solely for their benefit. These outings were a way to expose Korean society to its forgotten children. When

walking down the road with residents outside of the Holt community, people never failed to gawk or stare. Molly always encouraged the volunteers to take the residents outside of the Ilsan Center and to not be afraid of what others would think of us. Without exposure, people with disabilities would remain a shameful secret in such a traditional society. The district of Ilsan has even tried to move the center to another city in the past, but Molly will not budge. While many would like to forget about those who are orphaned or disabled, the Ilsan Center strives for equality, which it is trying to accomplish step-by-step.

When not doing daily activities with residents, I spent my time researching, talking to housemothers or people who lived in Molly's house, going to Holt events, or exploring South Korea on my own. Monday through Friday, I had a well-structured routine: breakfast at 7:30 am, activity #1 from 9:00 am to 11:00 am, lunch at 11:30 am, activity #2 from 1:00 pm to 3:00 pm, and dinner at 5:30 pm, after which, I was free to do whatever I wanted. Usually, I would spend my free time talking to people such as Lydia, Galen, Molly, Dr. Cho, or Esther. Not only were they the best English speakers on-site, each of them also had something unique about them.

Molly was the first person that I met once I stepped off of the plane at the Incheon Airport and came to be my first informant. Being the daughter of Harry and Bertha Holt and the current chairperson of HCS, she was well-versed on everything that had to do with Holt, South Korean history, and the Ilsan Center. She was an avid reader and had lived in South Korea for over fifty years, ever since she received her nursing degree from an east coast university in the U.S. However, before settling down at HCS she worked at

various orphanages around South Korea, specifically helping orphaned children with disabilities.

Molly had never married, and whenever somebody asked why, she would always say that there were a few boys in whom she was interested, but there were always other girls who suited them better. While this was obviously an anecdote that she used within a society that was overly conscious about marriage, Molly had clearly been married to her religion and work since she was in her twenties. Now at seventy-six years old, it was quite apparent that she was comfortable with whom she had become and the beliefs she held. She followed a very strict routine and she pronounced her faith multiple times a day in her own way. Something that I always admired about Molly was the fact that while she held very strong convictions, she still respected others beliefs.



[Molly Holt in her office at Holt Children's Services]

I was also fascinated by the fact that Molly would live nowhere else than South Korea. Standing at five feet and four inches with white and silver hair, porcelain skin, and not a spot of makeup ever on her face, she was the complete opposite of a typical Korean woman; however, everything else about her, her language, movements, mannerisms, and

style of living, were the epitome of being Korean. I learned a tremendous amount about Korean culture and history from this woman; always with a story up her sleeve, she was a researcher's dream. She was knowledgeable about a multitude of topics and was not scared to speak her mind, which was clearly the American aspect of her personality.

Molly became my gatekeeper into the world of adoption and Korean culture. Even if she could not candidly answer my questions, she always led me in numerous profitable directions, which opened up my eyes to the social problems occurring in South Korea. However, because of her strong religious convictions, I had to take everything that she said with a grain of salt and always remembered that whatever she told me would not only be from a conservative and religious point of view, but also from the perspective of someone who works for an adoption agency.

After Molly, Galen and Lydia were the second and third persons that I met after arriving in South Korea. Not only were they fellow KADs, they were also from Oregon. We instantly bonded over our past experiences, current thoughts on South Korean



[Galen, myself, and Lydia riding bikes through Ilsan Lake Park]

society, and KAD identity. Galen (20 years old) lived in a different building, therefore, we did not bond as well as Lydia and I did. However, we did have the chance to discuss certain topics pertaining to our experiences in South Korea.

This was his second time visiting his birth country and both times were through Holt programs designed for returning KADs (i.e., Heritage Tour and Ilsan Center Program). He was a very quiet person who preferred to read or learn about new topics than anything else; however, when we did interact, he spoke with conviction and knew exactly what he wanted to say and when.

Galen had recently begun to question his Christian faith, which put him in quite an interesting position given that HCS and HICS are Christian organizations. It was quite interesting following his transformation from being completely involved in his Church and growing up in a Christian household to questioning his moral foundation. Another interesting fact about Galen was that when he was an infant he lived at the Ilsan Center for a couple of years, because it was believed that he had Asberger syndrome; however, his adoptive parents soon realized that he was merely an introvert. The fact that he was able to visit his previous residence and reconnect with his housemother added another level of nostalgia to his trip.



[Galen coloring with a resident]

Lydia (19 years old), being the only other woman under the age of forty living in Molly's house, became an instant soul mate. Lydia and I share something that is uniquely ours: we are both Korean adoptees from the same wave (1990s) and we both located our birth parents while in South Korea. Sharing stories and issues that arose while growing up in a suburban, white, middle class family was enlightening and comforting; we shared

several of the same stories about our identities, but her history was entirely different from mine. She was put up for adoption when she was an infant because she was born with a cleft lip, something that Koreans view as a sign of misfortune. Her father made the decision to relinquish her because he had grown up with a sister who has cerebral palsy and did not want his family and Lydia to experience the ridicule and shame from society. Interestingly though, a



[Lydia painting a resident's nails]

year later her mother finally discovered the truth about Lydia, and they decided to move to the U.S. in hopes of finding her. Fifteen years later, Lydia was able to reconnect with her birth family through the HCS Post-Adoption Services in South Korea.

While her story seemed like a soap opera or a tragic tale that finished with a fantastic ending, her lived experience was not emotionally charged; she found the experience to be mainly “interesting.” She believed that her identity as an adoptee was not something that consumed her, and if anything, she was tired of being labeled as the adoptee and at this point in her life. Lydia also did not feel compelled to forge a strong relationship with her birth parents. Going to South Korea was definitely an experience for her, but not the ultimate journey. I found that because she had this perspective we were able to talk objectively about adoptee identity, the exploitative nature of adoption, the conflict between South Korea, the orphaned, and the returning adoptees, and anything

else that we found questionable. Lydia was not only a rock for me while abroad, she was also a confidant and someone that I could speak openly with about anything, something that was not only personally comforting while abroad, but very useful during my fieldwork.

I also shared the floor while living in Molly's house with another woman, Dr. Cho, one of the most amazing women I have ever met. Unlike Molly, whom I saw much more as an equal despite our age difference, Dr. Cho was like a mother away from home. In my mind she epitomized what it meant to be a Korean housewife and mother, while still being an independent woman. As a child, Dr. Cho and her sister escaped from North Korea by train to come live with her father who was a headmaster at a private school. She wanted to become a lawyer, but decided to become a pediatrician; instead she wanted to ensure that she could take care of her family despite famine and war. Now in her late seventies, Dr. Cho still practices and has worked for HCS since the 1950s. She once told me that she could have made more money at any other adoption agency, but she believed in Holt's mission and has never left. Even after going into retirement three years ago, she found it difficult to stay away from Holt and lives at the Ilsan Center indefinitely as the on-site pediatrician.



[Dr. Cho]

By watching Dr. Cho and interacting with her, I learned a lot about traditional South Korean culture and how much has really

changed within the past few decades. She taught herself how to speak English in medical school and was very capable; however, there were times when our words got lost in translation, making it difficult for us to have intellectual conversations. Despite this fact, I always felt like Dr. Cho was open to progressive thinking when it came to adoption if it meant that children could find homes; however, she had a very traditional way of seeing the world. She still believes that men are more capable of certain things and women should be submissive, displaying a very traditional Korean ideal. Therefore, my topics were limited when speaking to her due to the fact that I had to respect the social hierarchy (i.e., people cannot be friends unless they are the same age). However, without these limitations, I would not have learned a tremendous amount about subtleties in Korean culture and how tradition and modernity have and are currently clashing within society between the younger and older generations.

Throughout my three months living at the Ilsan Center, there were always short-term volunteers coming and going. Esther was originally a volunteer from California, and became such a wonderful member of the community that she was offered a job with the Post-Adoption Services at HCS and has been working there for about three years. While she is not technically an adoptee, I consider her to be a KAD since her situation is so unique. She was born in South Korea with various medical issues, some of which created deformities. Her parents eventually sent her to live with an American family in the U.S. where she could receive better medical services and be shielded from judgmental eyes. Despite the fact she resided in the U.S. for the majority of her young adult life, the U.S. family could not adopt her even though she would not have objected. Esther recently decided to return to South Korea and really enjoys the change of pace and atmosphere.

Given that Esther worked for HCS and has had the opportunity to live in the U.S. as well as South Korea, she was an invaluable informant and imperative to my research. For example, because she had lived in both countries for an extended amount of time she had the opportunity to learn what it meant to truly belong in both cultures. However, even though she knew much more about Korean culture than any of the other adoptees or myself, in her heart, she remained American, always armed with an opinion and a Western perspective. We had the chance to meet multiple times throughout my trip and discussed various topics such as Korean cultural norms, Confucianism, the context of Christianity in South Korea, and all things related to adoption.



[Lydia, Esther, a visiting adoptee, and Dr. Cho]

Esther also played a crucial role in the reunion with my birth mother. As a consultant for the Post-Adoption Services and a newfound friend, she was the one who worked on my file.

Esther was there throughout the entire process; she located my birth mother, contacted the place where she was living to make sure that the trip was emotionally safe for both parties, and most importantly, she became a confidant. Esther was an open individual and I always felt like I could ask for her advice.

While the previous five people were excellent informants, I knew that I needed to broaden my horizons and meet people who were not affiliated with Holt and have experienced South Korea outside of the adoption realm, specifically people who were free of religion and who were open to perspectives outside of traditional expectations. On weekends, I made a point to be adventurous and visited new places by myself or with newfound friends. While I met a few people while exploring South Korea and through the Internet, most were discovered through acquaintances. For example, I met multiple English Program in Korea (EPIK) teachers through Molly's niece, Marsha, who was visiting the Ilsan Center for the weekend and friendships grew from there. Although only a fraction of those relationships turned out to be directly profitable to my research, it was refreshing to see how easy it was to be open to new experiences while abroad.

The most enlightening individuals that I met while exploring the country included Cora, Suki, and Sarah; all of whom had completely different backgrounds and reasons for moving to South Korea. The first person I met was Cora. She happened to be interested in working with orphans with disabilities and visited the center shortly after we met. We soon realized that we had quite a bit in common and were both interested in the concept of identity.

I was only able to talk to Cora a total of three times during my trip, but they were very insightful discussions. Cora grew up in Chicago and is half Korean. She never learned about her Korean heritage, nor did she understand the ways of her Korean mother; therefore, she decided to move to South Korea a year ago to not only experience the culture, but to try and figure out whether or not her mother's parenting flaws were merely Korean traditions that she did not understand or for other reasons. Cora had

attended Ewha Women's University in Seoul and studied Korean language, worked as an English teacher for businessmen, and was trying to break out into the art scene. As a new resident, it was interesting to hear about her perspective on adoption (because she knew nothing about the current situation until we met), religion (because she was an atheist in a very Christian country), and identity (because her father was Caucasian and her mother was Korean). I enjoyed that fact that our histories and purposes for being abroad were diverse, clearly producing different experiences and adventures. She informed me about common norms and ideals among Korean people and helped me work through problems that arose when conducting research. After meeting Cora, I realized that without stepping outside of my comfort zone and trying something new I would never expose myself to new people or perspectives.

At various points in my research, I hit roadblocks and I searched the Internet for possible directions. I came across the TRACK website, which stands for Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoption Community of Korea. This organization advocates for past and present Korean adoptees and having a comprehensive knowledge about our unique situation in hopes of protecting our human rights. While meeting people sporadically was helpful, I wanted to try to associate with native Koreans who had definite opinions about adoption in Korea, which I found to be quite difficult since adoption is a very sensitive topic to this day and many Koreans disagree with the practice; however, TRACK seemed like a good place to start. After coming across Suki's information on the homepage, she told me that she was no longer affiliated with the group, but was willing to meet with me anyway. Curious about Molly's opinion, I asked her about TRACK that evening. She said that the organization had done a lot of work

with unwed mother groups; however, they had attacked HCS multiple times. After learning about the conflict between the two organizations, I felt very uneasy about meeting with Suki. After considering the pros and cons, I realized that as an ethnographer it is vital to think about the possible repercussions of one's actions; however, as I discovered, it can be that much more rewarding to cross boundaries when necessary.

Upon moving abroad with a five-year plan, Suki (44 years old) was willing to absorb any type of poison thrown at her. A family from Michigan adopted her in the 1960s, and at the age of four years old, her adoptive father began to sexually abuse her. Currently, she does not speak to her adoptive family. She said that a conglomerate of things initially pushed her towards moving to South Korea, and the past three years forced her to face her demons and were some of the worst years of her life, while still being the most enlightening. During her first two years, Suki dedicated her life to TRACK as the president's confidant. However, "after eating, breathing, and living for this cause" she realized that her time would be better-suited elsewhere rather than exceeding her limits. When we met for coffee, I instantly knew that everything she was telling me had been evaluated and fine-tuned over the duration of her stay abroad. Up until that point, I was only exposed to adoption and South Korea through a Christian or pro-adoption lens; Suki was the anomaly and it was refreshing. We discussed the oppressive nature of Confucianism, the cycle of adoption and how it is a symptom of larger social pathologies, the colonial syndrome that continues to plague Korean society and the lack of direction when it comes to social services in the country. I finally moved past the culture shock and saw the country from a more analytical angle and began to see the positive, with the negative aspects of society.

As with Suki, Sarah (29 years old) was also a Korean adoptee returning for the first time; however, her adoption story was not even remotely close to Suki's. Sarah grew up in a suburb of Michigan, USA, which was mostly white, working class. In college, she was primarily exposed to Caucasian, African-American, Latin American, or Middle Eastern students; not many Asians were in the area. The region also suffered from ethnic tension, and she eventually decided to see a therapist about her identity crisis (i.e., the duality of being a KAD). However, now she feels like it is not a matter of deciding between her two "options" as she calls them, but sees her identity as a process and she is content with this constant evolution; in this respect, I agree with her completely. After going through a similar dilemma, I have realized that identity is not something that can be pinpointed, but is constantly being negotiated.

Currently, Sarah is an EPIK teacher and is enjoying her time abroad immensely. While she feels like there is more pressure from the older generation of Koreans to assimilate, the younger generation seems to be more understanding of or at least not as concerned about her integration into



[On left side of table (front to back): Sarah, Marsha, myself; on right side of table (front to back): An EPIK teacher, Lydia, and a native Korean student]

her birth country. She also compared herself to Superman: Clark Kent was not only an orphan, but he dealt with feeling different, while trying to fit in at the same time within a community that was not originally his own. Despite the differences that are apparent between her and native Koreans, Sarah is beginning to feel like Korea is her new home. No longer does she talk about the people as “them,” she now feels like she can say “us.” As a fellow KAD, she sees adoption as something that can be beautiful and can help the country, but will not necessarily solve all of the country’s problems. To truly progress we should begin to look at the Korean psyche and the traditions that they adhere to.

Before traveling to South Korea, I had planned out my thesis project and had anticipated that much of my data and research would be conducted within the Willamette Valley. I accumulated multiple contacts with various transracial families and adoptees, and conducted several interviews. I thought that I would go abroad with my outline in hand and I would be able to check things off of my list. I soon realized that my research would be heading in an entirely different direction. Now that I have returned, my entire perspective on the country has changed from my earlier assumption of what I expected to experience, who I wanted to meet, and what I would learn while abroad; nothing was as I had planned, which luckily ended up being for the best. The result was that my entire project was turned upended, compelling me to pursue a new direction. While I did not find what I had expected, I did uncover things that became imperative to my research.

To add to the data that I collected while abroad, I have had the chance to speak with a wonderful woman in the United States, Melinda (44 years old). She is also a KAD and has visited South Korea multiple times, once volunteering at the Ilsan Center.

Melinda was actually one of the first KADs to return to South Korea after the Olympics

in 1988 through the Overseas Korean Foundation Program. The media and the public paid close attention to these returning KADs and their journey to their birth country. While abroad, she was able to televise her story throughout South Korea: she gave her birth name, a few facts about herself, and hoped that her birth mother would see her broadcast and contact HCS. However, after all these years she has not had any luck. After associating with Melinda and Suki, both from the same generation, I found that it was much more important for them to reconnect to their birth roots and find their birth parents than for Galen, Lydia, or myself.

Comparing my expectations before my trip and the actuality of my time abroad, I have learned many useful skills in regards to fieldwork and ethnographic writing. For example, before I began my field research, I was unsure about how to approach an interview. Once I arrived in South Korea, I realized that if I wanted to learn anything at all I needed to wash this ideal interview from my mind; it was not realistic for what I wanted to accomplish and my experience would only be as great as I allowed it to be. I knew that if I wanted to truly learn about South Korea, the people, and the culture, I would have to be attentive and open to all possibilities and never underestimate anyone or anything. The fact that I had the privilege of meeting many different types of people inside and outside of the Ilsan Center, allowed me to learn more about ethnographic research, as well as about the simplicity and the complexity of human interactions.

I also found that the best conversations occurred when I least anticipated it and were often unexpected. Just by being involved and open to different situations, I was able to meet people from very different backgrounds, compiling information that steered my research in a positive direction. The things that went unsaid were also just as important as

anything else I had discovered. This realization proved both helpful and clarifying as far as my own perspective on South Korea and international adoption were concerned.

Moreover, participant observation became quite important since I did not speak the native language.

Lastly, I feel like it is necessary to comment on my gender role while abroad. Not only was I a KAD, I was also a woman anthropologist in a male-dominated society. In South Korea, being a woman decreased my possible subject pool and placed a whole new set of expectations and responsibilities upon me. Therefore, I had to learn how to be more Korean, and also how to be a Korean woman who followed traditional Confucian values. More positively, similar to Irma McClaurin's experience in Belize (1996), I felt like being a woman brought me closer to those that I lived with for the three months since most of them were women. However, I was not able to address the opposite gender for academic or personal reasons without supervision. Nonetheless, I believe that being a women and having mostly female subjects and only one male subject helped me frame my perspective in a unique and focused way.

When conducting my fieldwork, I not only had the chance to meet wonderful people affiliated with HCS, I also encountered many interesting people outside of the center by stepping outside of my comfort zone. I learned that as an ethnographer one must be flexible, open to all possibilities, and socially aware of one's positionality within their work and in relation to their subjects. Now having introduced the setting of my research and my informants, I turn the attention to government discourse on adoption and KADs in chapter three.

[Chapter Three]

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

In this chapter, I elaborate on South Korean history and how Confucianism has directly affected government discourse. In this context, this traditional ideology has crossed into the political and economic spheres by affecting policy, and the direction of government-funded programs regarding adoption. Confucianism places stress upon filial relations and respect for thy nation and thy parents. When this traditional ideology was combined with unfortunate economic downturns, and denial of social problems, South Korea's social welfare system remained stagnated regarding the elderly, the handicapped, and specifically, the orphaned. However, the nation was eventually faced with a choice: they had to choose between continual denial of their problems, which involved foreign criticism, and the public acknowledgement of adoption and adoptees, which unfortunately would involve admitting their faults and public embarrassment; they chose the latter.

I argue that while the country states that it wants to encourage KAD assimilation through re-education, the government is actually more concerned about economic and political greatness. I will not only discuss the reasons why the government decided to address this dilemma, but also present specific examples that illustrate this change of perspective and how they were driven by Confucianism. To conclude the chapter, I will discuss South Korea's reaction to globalization and their focus on preserving Koreaness and saving face. When analyzed, there are multiple reasons why South Korea would want KADs to return—economic and political ties, preservation of tradition, and pride—and they do not seem completely genuine. The conflict of purpose has clearly contributed to

the complication of the KADs' experience as they search for a sense of belonging while abroad.

As Korea emerged from the devastation of war, the president at the time, Seung-Man Lee, was highly supportive of the idea of foreign adoption law, but for questionable reasons. As Lee explicitly stated, he wanted to solve the problem of interracial orphans by finding non-Korean homes for bi-racial children (Lee 2005: 124). Given the height of conservatism and adherence to Confucianism, keeping a child that was not fully Korean was ludicrous, which emphasizes the idea 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 from contaminating the Korean blood with that of foreign.

When evaluating the evolution of the South Korean social welfare system, it is apparent that they have revamped the structure and the goals numerous times as the country continues to develop. Similar to the 1950s, there are currently many private institutions (e.g., HCS) 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, South Korea began to rapidly industrialize and the government chose to invest in military expansion and economic growth rather than social welfare programs, putting them at the bottom of the list once again. Consequently, many programs could not be enacted, 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), which in theory decreased the need for private organizations in South Korea. However, many of

the child welfare centers that were built in response to policy change turned into places for mentally or physically handicapped people, which did not address the abundance of Korean orphans and increased international adoption. Most recently, South Korea suffered another downturn due to the Asian Economic Crisis in 1997, sending the country into a downward spiral and unemployment and adoption rates increased once again (Lee 2005: 364).

To comment on the current status of South Korea's welfare system, in an article in *The Korea Times*, Lee Hyo-sik stated that South Korea ranked 28th out of the 29 OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries based upon how much of their gross domestic product (GDP) was spent on social welfare in 2010. At only 10.95%, the nation was ranked one above Mexico with 75% of that being public-sector welfare (i.e., what the government offers) and 20% voluntary private schemes (i.e., non-profit organizations outside of the government) (*Korea Times*). While 75% seems like a large percentage, it should be noted that it is a large percentage of a very small fund.

If a disaster or crisis occurred, South Korea would lose any progress made and react by opening up the international adoption gates. This illustrates how South Korea would rather deny their problems by distancing themselves from adoption; therefore, creating a perpetual social problem. Since successive South Korean governments have always viewed adoption from a Confucian approach, 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). By the

1990s, South Korean government policies and discourse on adoption changed drastically towards a positive foreign perspective targeting returning KADs and foreign capital.

A second turning point in Korean government discourse was in 1999 when the president of South Korea, Kim Dae Jung, gave a formal apology to four hundred Korean born adoptees at a ceremony (highlighting the opening of the Adoption Center in Seoul) in Washington, DC. He not only openly addressed the public stigma of adoption in South Korea for the first time, but he also acknowledged 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 quaint, the drive behind this reconnection is based highly upon global gain: not only will South Korea create more foreign ties, they will also receive foreign dollars by way of returning adoptees. Despite public education campaigns and public policy implementation in the country, Koreans still pity adoptees for their lack of Korean kin ties, which suggests that there is still a disconnect between governmental and public discourse. However, that is not to say that it is only the government or only the public discourse that perpetuates falsities or negative connotations regarding adoption. Ultimately, what these two examples show is that that the turn in events were not influenced by a new social perspective (i.e., a change in Confucian ideology or the usage of this ideology). The change that occurred was due to the fact that South Korea could benefit from the connection with adopted foreigners and their respective countries; and, most importantly, the government was embarrassed and as a result had to save face; or in other words, save their pride.

The Korean government has also attempted to implement more policies and programs that directly influence returning KADs and the adoption community; however, it could be debated whether or not they are positive or negative. 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). HCS is more prominent; thus, they can conduct more international adoptions than the other agencies such as Eastern Social Welfare Society. However, HCS must carefully track how many adoptions are being processed considering that the government continues to decrease the number of children sent abroad by 3-5% each year. 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.

Multiple HCS employees (i.e., Molly, Dr. Cho, and Esther) have told me that the Adoption Quota policy has been in the works for years; Molly could not even remember when it was first implemented. Every year, the government says that they have a plan to get rid of the need; however, the plan always seems to fall short 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. Not only does this reconfirm that the nation and people are adhering to Confucianism, but also that the country is clearly not ready for such an act considering the lack of agreement between the agencies and the government, and the public and the government; it is clear that the country is not ready to take responsibility due to traditional notions of family relations. For example, preference for “special needs” and mixed-race children are still given to foreign adopters because of Confucian thoughts on imperfect children (i.e., disabilities are signs of misfortune) (Kim

2003: 61), despite the fact that only 0.2% of South Korea's population actually practices Confucianism (U.S. Department of State).

In the 1990s, Frances Cairncross 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” (Volkman 2005: 185). Due to the fluidity of national borders and the various means of communication, it is assumed that we are in a state of multiculturalism and that we are all simultaneously part of a “global village.” However, despite the romantic notion of multiculturalism, globalization has only hardened South Korean national identity, the complete opposite of what Cairncross has envisioned. As an example, Elise Preblin wrote an article titled “Three-week Re-education to Koreaness,” where she recalled when globalization was announced as an “unstoppable economic new order that would diminish national identities and culture” (Preblin 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 are placed upon South Korea, they will combat it with equal force in the form of nationalism (Preblin 2008: 325).

To ensure the survival of Korean traditions and values, the Korean government created the Overseas Korean Foundation (OKF) with two goals in mind: they wanted to keep the Koreans' authentic identity intact and re-educate returning KADs (Preblin 2008: 325). Preblin believed that while these programs have been created in the hopes of combating the negative aspects of globalization from inside the country, they also serve another very important purpose: to attract returning 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” (Preblin 2008: 323). This idea is definitely based upon traditional ideology.

Confucianism states that one must honor thy parents. Thus, preserving a connection with one’s parents is important; however, in terms of “parents,” it means birth parents, since filial relationships are the only ones that are considered to be “real.”

Despite the level of knowledge that returning KADs had about their adoption history or birth country, Preblin believed that cultural programs, especially OKF, have the structure of a rite of passage, which is defined as an event that marks a person’s transition from one status to another. Thus, the efficiency of OKF depended less on shared belief and agreement and more on the appropriate orchestration and action of the program, which illustrates that the focus is on aesthetically, but not actually showing one’s Koreaness, creating an illusory sense of belonging. She also concluded that OKF was 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 identity of KADs are directly confronted through these programs and they are compelled to demonstrate their Koreaness; therefore clearly showing a misunderstanding between how KADs perceive their own identity and how they are expected to act within a Korean context.

Reflecting upon my own experiences as well as other adoptees, programs designed for returning KADs often create a more defined separation between who is Korean and who is not: “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, Galen stated that while on the Heritage Tour (offered through HCS) he felt at home during his stay, but only because he was surrounded by other adoptees and their families, making it easier to immerse himself into the culture. He did note that it was a superficial feeling of acceptance since he was never forced to mingle with those who were not “like him.”

Melinda also participated in a cultural program and stated that the program was full of traditional activities, such as a tea ceremony, a mock wedding, a Hangul and language class, visits to the Folk Village, the Blue House, and various palaces. The goal was to introduce KADs to the Korean culture. However, the fact that these are traditional events and are not found in everyday Korean life serve to forge a deeper connection between KADs and their heritage. It is as if the government is setting a precondition, which is that to be truly Korean, one must experience things that are truly unique to Korea. These re-education programs are therefore not created with the KAD in mind, but with the intention of saving face and teaching Confucian ideology to KADs to meet the country’s expectations and thus be accepted.

The F4 Visa is also another great example of South Korea welcoming KADs back while being an illusory sense of acceptance. 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 (Global Overseas

Adoptees' Link (G.O.A.'L)). However, this Act was not established with the intent of having Korean adoptees under the new law. KADs 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 KADs to truly become a native; however, once again, it must be remembered that Korea wants to preserve their national identity. The F4 Visa only lasts for two years, giving adoptees a false sense of identity and sense of belonging in the mean time.

Upon consideration, I have discovered that many of my own experiences have reflected what Preblin stated. I did feel like many of the events that I participated in were rites of passage in the sense that I was taking part in something traditional; however, making the emotional connection was not necessary to fulfill the needs of the cultural program. I merely had to show that I could perform said actions. For example, I often went to many different types of traditional ceremonies that Molly was involved in, and obviously they were always in Korean. 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 like I was actually participating in Korean culture, despite the fact that I would usually sit there frustrated by the fact that 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 whenever possible; while in Korea, I was to be Korean and to be proud of my heritage no matter how superficial I felt my connection

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 One of their objectives being to contribute to adoptees in identity formation and understanding Korean culture (Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (G.O.A.'L)).

was. I do not deny that I made connections with wonderful native Koreans; nevertheless, the experience only confirmed the differences between my birthplace and myself, and rather than being re-educated, the experiences created a frustrating situation, because certain things were being expected of me, and I was not able to meet those demands.

While these cultural programs along with the F4 Visa seem like nice gestures from the Korean government, it is difficult to see their actions as entirely genuine. When combined, these gestures could be seen through two different lenses: First, by offering cultural programs and the F4 Visa, Korea is showing that KADs are not only welcome to visit, but we can also take that step towards becoming a resident. Conversely, the fact that KADs were not included at the very beginning could also show a contradiction between the apprehension to give KADs rights similar to natives and the goal of cultural programs.

As a KAD, I see these new policies and cultural programs as baby steps in regards to addressing the real problem; they are merely a peace offering, which aligns with the nation's previous intention to show that they had not completely forgotten their "forgotten children." They represent an air of showmanship, as they are mostly concerned with saving face and adhering to Confucianism within the global village. The Adoption Quota Policy also seems like a positive direction towards a future where adoption is unnecessary. However, the idea has been romanticized to such an extent since the inception of international adoption; it does not seem like a logical answer given the current climate of South Korea and their place in the global world. We must question what Korean policies and programs say about their true intentions and how the current

government perspective on KADs and international adoption affect KADs' sense of belonging in a Korean context.

In sum, the elusiveness of the South Korean adoption policy illustrates that there is 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 exactly foreigners, which creates a complex situation where KADs must attempt to find their own sense of belonging while trying to adhere to not only their personal identity, but also Korean expectations. With government discourse in mind, I will now discuss how public discourse differs and aligns with that of the government. While both discourses have adhered to Confucian ideology, the public seems to be influenced more so by history and popular media, which as a result, have fashioned stereotypes and certain expectations about KADs.

[Chapter Four]

Public Discourse: Traditions, History, and Popular Media

After having the chance to socialize with native Koreans, my sense was that Korea's society could be divided into two distinct social groups: the older and the younger generations. The older generation includes those older than forty years old, who experienced or have memories of the Korean War or economic depressions, and who possibly were alive before South Korea became an independent country; the younger generation can be defined as those less than forty years old and who came of age during or after the economic boom in the 1960s. Overall, these two groups seemed to have different perspectives on and levels of interest in adoption and KADs, which they expressed explicitly and implicitly; however, both were respectively affected by Confucian ideology and popular media, and this fact was illustrated by how they reacted to the presence of KADs in South Korea.

In this chapter, I will discuss public discourse in terms of these two groups and how they perceive KADs. I argue that Korean society's perspective on KADs can predominantly be contributed to the effects of Confucianism, history (e.g., The Korean War), and popular media, such as Hallyuwood films (i.e., equivalent to American Hollywood) and melodrama television; all of which have combined to create a stereotype of whom KADs are and how they should act in a Korean context. Utilizing my own experiences along with other adoptee stories, I will illustrate how certain expectations have been placed upon adoptees, which, as a result, challenge our place within the Korean society, our notion of identity, and our sense of belonging.

Throughout my experience abroad, I did not doubt that Koreans generally wanted us to have an enjoyable trip and to experience all that South Korea had to offer. For

example, Melinda told me that throughout her entire trip native Koreans were always warm, and wanting her to have “the best experience as possible,” especially after finding out that she was an adoptee². I also experienced something similar: once natives knew that I was not what they expected, they seemed sympathetic and concerned about my time in South Korea. While most seemed to be interested in the KAD experience, it was difficult to not have reservations about their true intentions. I realized that many natives were concerned about shedding positive light on South Korea as damage control. This was particularly the case with the older generation, most of whom knew about adoption, but lacked an accurate understanding and were much more explicit about their expectations and hopes than their younger counterparts.

Lydia also recalled certain expectations that older Koreans often had for her while in South Korea: her extended birth family wanted her to not only love South Korea and learn the customs and language, they also believed that her top priority should be to find a Korean spouse, and she should only be called by her Korean name³. This statement suggests two things about Korean society: the public wants KADs to conform to preexisting traditional ways of thinking (i.e., Confucianism) in the hopes of placing our birth culture above our adoptive culture; and natives value traditional family names more than the ones that have been bestowed upon us by our adoptive parents. This can be seen as a representation of the need to continue the Korean bloodline and to demonstrate one’s identification with the Korean group.

The other volunteers agreed with me that it was difficult not to feel pressured by the older generation to assimilate back into Korean society, our birthplace, and take back

² Melinda. Interview via e-mail. February 24, 2012.

³ Lydia. Interview in South Korea. December 2, 2011.

what was supposedly stolen from us as babies. For example, I was often greeted as someone who had returned home, which was a feeling that the other volunteers felt as well. Lydia stated that she was often treated more like a Korean than a foreigner, and they wanted her to actually be more Korean⁴. For Melinda, when talking to older adults, she sometimes felt ignored, because once they realized she could not speak her native tongue, they did not have the patience to deal with her and merely waved her away with their hands⁵. Even if they knew that we were foreigners, most Koreans still could not get past our phenotypic traits: we were foremost Korean, creating confusion about how to deal with us: why did we know nothing about our customs, and even more concerning, why could we not speak our language?

While being explicit about their concerns, the older generation was even more forthright with how to solve this supposed problem. Although they appeared to sympathize with KADs, that did not stop them from scolding us about our lack of cultural knowledge and for not embracing our Koreaness. On many occasions for instance, older Koreans projected their own ideas upon me about tradition and personhood and expected compliance. Even though I attempted to learn the Korean language by taking a college course before going abroad, natives still found it shameful that I could not speak my native language and told me that I must learn it while in the country, making it less of a suggestion and more of a command (there was also an assumption that it would be easier for me to learn than because I had “Korean blood”). While it might be seen as a general cultural norm for the older generation to tell the younger ones what is right and wrong, in

⁴ Lydia. Interview in South Korea. September 30, 2012.

⁵ Melinda. Interview via e-mail. February 28, 2012.

this case, I think that it was much more profound since my foreign Caucasian counterparts were pardoned for their lack of cultural knowledge.

Native Koreans also told Melinda how horrible they felt about her adoption and that she should have been raised in South Korea, and as a token of their sympathy, Melinda was given various gifts⁶. In any other context, this may seem odd, but in South Korea, gifts are emotionally charged gestures. Whenever I met someone new or of importance, there was an expected reciprocity: I would give them a gift and they would give me one in return, showing respect, good *kibun* (i.e., feeling of being comfortable), and courtesy. Koreans were not just giving Melinda a gift; they were expressing their empathy in a very Korean way. However, it must be noted that there is also a materialistic side to gift giving in Korean society. As a very thing-oriented people, public display of wealth is important to them.

While older Koreans were explicit about their expectations for KADs, they were implicit about their reasoning behind the expectations. The commands were never followed by an explanation, it was as if it did not need any sort of reasoning, it was merely logical. At first it seemed as if they were only trying to help us properly integrate into South Korean society. However, I soon discovered that their intentions were less sincere and more historically and ideologically charged. I suggest that a reason why the older generation was not only more concerned about the KAD experience, but also more interested than the younger generation, was because they were born and raised during a time before modernization took full effect. On the other hand, while the younger generation adheres to Confucian ideology, they have taken this ideology and have made it

⁶ Melinda. Interview via e-mail. February 28, 2012.

their own as it was passed from one generation to another. For example, many young professionals do not even want to have children, because children have become such a huge investment (i.e., the cost of education), which does not reflect the Confucian notion of having a child who will pass on one's family name ⁷. Also, the younger generation was not affected by the Korean War and has not seen economic depression. These alone are two major factors that influence how adoption is perceived and dealt with.

For example, after the Korean War, the country was left in ruins and was not able to care for its own people. Despite their colonial past, the culture and customs have endured throughout the centuries, producing very proud people and designating adoption as something that can only be identified as an embarrassment. When KADs return to their birth country it is as if they are rectifying the past. As the economy grows, South Korea becomes more globalized and is increasingly becoming exposed to the outside world and foreign media; therefore, the topic of adoption is not something that is a part of the younger generations reality. It does not have to be, unlike the older generation who has felt the effects of war and economic depression. While abroad, I often heard "I'm sorry" during my travels, especially from the older generation who tended to express sympathies towards my position as a KAD.

As a way to illustrate the younger generations lack of knowledge and disinterest in the KAD condition, I will use one of my own experiences as an example. I went to a group meet-up for Koreans in the Portland area where I had chance to talk to Korean enthusiasts and immigrants, as well as native Koreans studying English here in the U.S. Most of the native Koreans did not know how to approach me. They did not ask about my

⁷ Cora. Interview in South Korea. November 17, 2011.

adoption, they were only interested in whether or not I spoke Korean. When I explained my situation, they immediately told me that it would be better to not tell people that I was an adoptee, because it was not acceptable in Korean society. This advice not only shows that negative ideas about adoption are still alive and well, but also that these ideas have been passed down from generation to generation. However, unlike the older generation, the younger continues to not have any sort of exposure to this subject matter and, because of this, do not have strong opinions about adoptees other than the ideas that are imposed by Confucian ideology.

In the company of native Korean youth, I always asked about their education on adoption post-Korean War. All replied that there was none from elementary school to higher education, thus only reinforcing the fact that the awareness is lacking among the younger generation, while only remaining prevalent among the older. Lydia confided in me that she experienced similar negative perceptions before her first trip to South Korea. As a part of a Home-Stay Program between Eugene and its sister city in South Korea, she had the chance to live with three native Koreans under the age of twenty years old. She found that they were not interested about her adoption experience; they were content with the fact that they did know about this phenomenon⁸. This is not surprising given the fact that Korean culture remains highly imbued with the idea that bloodlines should remain the major criteria in defining kin relations, and it is important to not offend others by discussing particular subjects, especially if the other person is not one's equal (i.e., the same age).

⁸ Lydia. Interview via e-mail. December 10, 2012.

On the basis of Lydia's and my own interaction with the younger Koreans, it is apparent that they are either shielded or do not encounter situations where adoption discourses would be discussed. I believe that the only avenue in which they engage in conversations about adoption is in the form of melodrama television shows or Hallyuwood films (which is equivalent to American Hollywood). However, while there is a lack of understanding, the younger generation seems to understand the KAD condition more so than that of the older. For example, while it is clear that we, as KADs, were different, the younger generation accepted this fact and did not force assimilation upon myself or the other KAD volunteers in the same fashion as the older generation. Sarah was told by one of her students that "you are American, but you are Korean too, but really, you are American."⁹ While the youth may not be interested in the technicalities or acquiring knowledge about the phenomenon, at least they showed a sense of understanding of the duality KADs experience when they return to their birth country.

When examining the perspectives among the older and younger generations on adoption and KADs, is it not a case of person blaming. If anything, the gap in their knowledge could be contributed to the lack of exposure to the subject matter, because of the shame of the phenomenon, as well as the biased Korean media. However, because South Korea has chosen to participate in the global market and more people are traveling outside of the country, their perspectives are becoming more worldly. Nonetheless, in contrast with government discourse, the public remains equivalent to America in the 1950s.

⁹ Sarah. Interview in South Korea. March 13, 2012.

People may assume that South Korea's modernization equals enlightened thinking; however, they would be misinformed. In South Korea, I found that in current media there is a distinct stereotype for KADs. So Young Park stated in her article, *Transnational Adoption, Hallyu, and the politics of Korean popular culture*, "the most striking about these shows is the contrasting mix of the super-technological and the traditional" (Park 2010: 151); the medium itself showing a duality between tradition and modernity. Korean television is saturated with reality television shows depicting the "adoptee's personal narrative of separation and trauma" representing the "collective political trauma of the nation" (Park 2010: 152). While these shows are a sign that South Korea is becoming more aware of adoptees, the nature of the shows also depicts a melancholy story about the "so-called victims of diaspora" (Park 2010: 152). While it seems like an admirable move on the country's part to attempt to make adoption something that can be openly discussed, the way that KADs are represented is less desirable. One of the more popular shows in South Korea is the family search show, and the focus is on the fact that Korea is now wealthy enough to reunite adoptees with their birth families. Shows such as this only fashion and perpetuate stereotypes of what a KAD is and how they should be perceived upon their return.

The aftermath of the Korean War also created what some call the "victim diaspora: the mass domestic dislocation and worldwide emigration of Koreans that resulted from rapid industrialization and modernization in the 1960s" (Park 2010: 152). The idea of KADs as victims represents a group of individuals who are displaced, voiceless, and powerless in the Korean context. Television shows and films exploit the

idea of the maladjusted adoptee and how our lives were ultimately negatively affected, because we were deprived of our birth culture and people.

In 1989, MBC (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation), one of the major national South Korean television and radio networks, created a documentary about adoptees of Korean descent in Europe. They focused on a Swedish woman named Susan Brink and portrayed her adoption as a “tragedy.” It pointed out not only the horrible things that happened in her past, such as physical and verbal abuse by her adopted mother, but overall, the failures of international adoption and the shortcomings of South Korea (Park 2010: 153). Eventually, Brink was reunited with her birth mother. The documentary tracked the whole process of their reunion, capturing what Park described as “collective loss, longing, and hardship experienced in the aftermath of the postwar diaspora” (Park 2010: 153); it was a success. Brink’s story was then turned into a feature film, *Susan Brink’s Arirang*, showing how popular this type of television is in South Korea, and how adoption discourse could be acceptable if presented in a dramatic and tragic context. Given the fact that there are no shows or films portraying a positive side of adoption, it is difficult to see how one could think otherwise—clearly, adoption will inevitably take people down a troubled path.

Park also made an interesting connection between the longing for a North and South Korean reunification and transnational adoptees and their birth mothers. Perhaps the KAD stereotype could also be contributed to the fact that just like the family members who were separated after the Korean War, adoptees had no choice in the matter and were abruptly taken from their kin and their country. This presents the stereotype of a primal longing for reunification in both respects (Park 2010: 156). By openly discussing

adoption, Korean media is utilizing technology to try and heal past wounds by way of family reunion television shows, documentaries, and Hallyuwood films. These visual mediums demonstrate that the country is prosperous while rewriting the past by generating what Park called "cultural capital" (Park 2010: 158). While KADs and adoption are still seen as a result of the country's problems, they are attempting to use this phenomenon as leverage rather than sulking in the past, signifying that they are looking towards a brighter future with less overseas adoptions.

Evaluating South Korea in terms of the older and younger generation brought a very enlightening perspective to the general discourse or perspective on adoption and KADs. Not only does it demonstrate that there are various ways to perceive the KAD condition in a Korean context, it also illustrates various ways in which Korean society is progressing while relentlessly adhering to traditions. By examining public discourse and how it is informed by public media, history, and Confucianism, we can better understand how expectations and KAD stereotypes develop, which alludes to how KADs are compelled to react: one must reconfigure their identity in this new context or be continuously reprimanded for their lack of Korean competency. In the final chapter, I will expand upon the conflict between adhering to one's identity in an American context and one's identity in a Korean; once abroad, a KAD must reconfigure their identity to find a sense of belonging and I will illustrate this in terms of my own personal transformation.

[Chapter Five]

The Rite of Passage: Finding my Sense of Belonging

Before traveling to South Korea, I defensively told people that I was American when they asked what I was; however, I knew that they were searching for a different answer. When I was a little girl, I always hoped that I would wake up the next morning with blue eyes like my dad and dirty blonde hair like my mom, but that dream never materialized. Even in college, I believed that I could hide my ethnicity with my thick American accent and American clothing, but despite my efforts, I was continuously reminded about the differences. Since my trip abroad, I have come to realize just how important identity is for a person, and the question remains: what does identity mean to me as a KAD who has returned to her birth country?

My family and friends told me what a wonderful, self-reflecting journey returning to my birth country was going to be. I do not deny that this trip made me self-reflect nor that it was wonderful, but I feel like my experience was not what they had assumed it would be. I view my trip abroad as a rite of passage (i.e., an experience where one moves from one status to another). However, rather than transforming from a girl into a woman, I went from being someone who questioned their identity and struggled with their dyadic existence in the context of American culture, to someone who felt compelled to locate their sense of belonging in a Korean context, to, finally, someone who now better understands the complexity of their situation and does not feel compelled to decide between being Korean or American. Despite my efforts to be American in America and Korean in South Korea, I will never truly be accepted in either country since my appearances and heritage do not match how I perceive myself within each context; thus, I

remain betwixt and between, but accept it. In this chapter, I will discuss how Confucian ideology, through the direct influence of public and government discourse, compelled me to reconfigure my identity in a Korean context and how complex it was when trying to find my own sense of belonging abroad. I came to the conclusion that while I may always question how Korean I am or how American I am, I will always be a KAD, and to better illustrate this process, I will discuss it in terms of a rite of passage.

A rite of passage is composed of three parts: separation, transformation, and reincorporation. As discussed in the introduction, there are various factors that influence how a KAD may form their personal identity. In my case, my family did not deny the fact that I was adopted or Korean; however, they did not feel compelled to constantly remind me of the fact. Therefore, it was up to me to decide when and to what degree I wanted to explore my heritage. Rather than being proud of my ethnicity, I have been ashamed for most of my life, which I contribute to the fact that I was not exposed to KADs (other than my sister who is also a KAD), Korean people, or Korean culture. I identified with my parents ethnicity and the dominant culture in my community and household, which created personal and ethnic identity confusion. I also have an individualistic mentality as a result of the American notion of personhood; both of these factors influenced my experience abroad.

In the first stage, separation, I was forced into a different culture that was based upon different notions of identity and kinship altogether, and I was forced to come face-to-face with my dyadic existence. Not only did I experience typical culture shock while abroad, but I also realized that my personal identity in the American context would be challenged, and if I wanted to acclimate, I would have to reconfigure my personal

identity within the Korean context for the remainder of my trip. Besides the stress that I placed upon myself, I also received pressure from the Employees of HCS who were always encouraging me to explore my heritage and find the “answers.” For other foreigners it was apparent that they were foreigners, and so they were excused for their errors. However, KADs look phenotypically similar; therefore, there were many other expectations placed upon us, which made dealing with the culture shock that much trickier. I went from having to convince Americans that I was American rather than Korean, to convincing Koreans that I was Korean and not American.

In the second stage, transformation, I not only had to learn how to be more Korean, I also had to learn how to be a KAD within a Confucian system of thinking. In the United States, adoption is seen as a positive thing, because America is supposed to be diverse; however, in South Korea adoption continues to shame the country whether it is domestic or international. Thus, my return was not only a reminder of the country’s shameful past, I directly went against many Confucian notions: I was born out of wedlock to a single mother; I do not have a Korean family to call my own; and I was adopted outside of the country. While none of this was directly my fault, I was still a representative, and I felt compelled to illustrate my Koreaness, just like I am compelled to show my Americaness while at home.

Before my trip, I lacked cultural knowledge, and this transformation period was truly a crash course in all things South Korean. I was always told that I had “Korean blood” in my veins while abroad and so things would come easier; it was difficult for Koreans to understand why I was so inadequately trained by my parents, and even when they realized I was an adoptee, they still could not understand why my adoptive parents

did not try to inform me about my heritage; why, as natives put it, would someone not teach their child about their “God-given heritage”? It was clear that one can never be Korean enough, only too American, and a KAD’s notion of identity is constantly being negotiated depending on whom we are in the presence of (natives, foreigners, or fellow adoptees). One’s personal identity is always being pulled in different directions, and the question remains. Is there a place for KADs and how should they feel about themselves in the context of Korean culture?

While abroad, I attempted to absorb as much about South Korean culture as I could to aid in my “assimilation” into Korean society: I attended Hangul classes; I went to all the national monuments; I went to traditional Korean events; and I tried to associate with native Koreans. However, when working with native Koreans and doing things Korean style, I felt completely out of my element, because I was discovering their world through naive eyes and everything I absorbed was a revelation despite my physical likeness to the population. During this stage, I had to transition from being a KAD who questioned their personal and ethnic identity everyday in an American context, to feeling compelled to locate my sense of belonging and in a context that I had tried to reject my entire life.

Upon reflection, one of the most important points in my journey was meeting my birth mother, Kwan-Ja. I was initially apprehensive, but I decided that it was a once on a lifetime chance. Unlike Lydia, my parents were not still together or even living among the general public; my mother was committed to a mental institution immediately after I was put up for adoption due to “mental instability.” Since she had been in an institution for the past twenty-one years, her social skills were lacking, so everything that was stated

was stated as a fact, devoid of explicit emotion. Nonetheless, she remembered who I was and told me that her dream had come true: she now knew that I was safe, healthy, and educated.



[Kwan-Ja and me]

Education was the most important thing to her, and she was very proud of the fact that I was going to college. Our encounter only lasted three hours, but I will always remember that day. Not only did I

learn more about my past and medical history, things that I never thought I would uncover, I also realized that just because I have “Korean blood” running through my veins and Kwan-Ja was my mother, that did not mean that South Korea was my home or that we had a deep undeniable connection that needed to be re-forged; I am not obligated to be “Korean” in any sort of way, and I can determine my own personhood.

In the final stage, reincorporation, I transitioned into a position where I better understood the complexity of my situation and did not feel compelled to decide between being exclusively Korean or American; it was impractical. I have also come to terms with the fact that my ethnic identity and my personal identity do not have to remain exclusive.

Rather than being defensive about my heritage, I should learn how to cope with that aspect of my identity, and I have come to terms with the fact that I am phenotypically Korean no matter what and that is how I am presented to the world. My identity will also always be reconfiguring and in constant flux between my Americanness and my Koreaness; however, the one thing that I will always be sure of is that I am a KAD in all contexts.

While in South Korea, it was clear that there was a misunderstanding between who KADs were expected to be and how we actually perceived our own sense of belonging. Amidst these conflicting notions, I realize that I felt most at home among fellow adoptees. While I may never feel completely comfortable with being labeled a Korean or a Korean American, since I do not fully understand what those titles represent as of yet for myself, I will always know what it means to be a KAD.

Eleana Kim, a prolific ethnographer on adoption and adoptees stated that KADs hold a very unique space within the “fourth culture”: an



[Sarah, myself, Lydia, and Marsha: three proud KADs, and one proud second-generation Korean]

adoptee is not a part of the Korean culture, nor the American, and 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 (Kim 2003: 65). Not only do I believe in this cultural space, I experienced it while abroad. When confused or lonely, the other KADs and I always had one another to confide in, because we understood the trials and tribulations of being a returning adoptee. I went to South Korea in search of greater knowledge about the country and my dyadic existence, and I did not return empty handed; after serious consideration, I truly believe I went through a transformation or a rite of passage while abroad. I physically took a journey that transformed the way I feel about adoption in the context of Korean culture, as well as an intellectual and emotional journey, resulting in a different understanding of my identity.

[Conclusion]

Upon my return, I began this ethnography by trying to better understand my voice as an ethnographer, which clearly informed my perspective on government and public discourses in South Korea, along with my positionality as a returning KAD. I have learned that there is a direct conflict between American and South Korean perspectives on identity and kinship—while the U.S. emphasizes diversity and one does not have to be blood kin to be a family, South Korea emphasizes homogeneity and emphasizes filial piety. As a result, the Korean government and society have remained highly imbued with Confucian ideology in spite of rapid modernization, and this has informed how KADs are treated upon their return to their birth country and evokes identity confusion.

Once abroad, certain expectations are placed upon returning KADs due to these traditional notions of consanguineal relations, the nation's desire to save face, and the hope to preserve their Koreaness, which obligates KADs to reconfigure their identity or remain in a liminal space—neither a native or a foreigner. Amidst these expectations, KADs feel compelled to get in touch with their heritage and to assimilate due to external or internal pressures; therefore, in the hopes of finding a sense of belonging within a nation that has historically been ashamed of them, KADs must reconcile the identity that is bestowed upon them and how they perceive themselves within a Korean context.

By concluding my ethnography with reflection upon my own rite of passage while abroad, one of my main goals was to illustrate the complexity of a KAD's return to South Korea and, ultimately, how it is not as many assume. The journey does not always fill a void or answer all of one's questions: it can be confusing, difficult, and emotionally straining.

Throughout my fieldwork, I have continued to question whether or not I am Korean or American and whether or not I actually need to know. When I was in elementary school my mom showed me this poem that she discovered by an unknown author. I always thought it was beautiful, but I never really understood the effect of its message until I read it once I was returned to the U.S.:

Legacy of An Adopted child

Once there were two women who never knew each other.
 One you do not remember, the other you call Mother.
 Two different lives shaped to make you one.
 One became your guiding star, the other became your sun.
 The first one gave you life, and the second taught you to live it.
 The first gave you a need for love. The second was there to give it.
 One gave you a nationality. The other gave you a name.
 One gave you a talent. The other gave you aim.
 One gave you emotions. The other calmed your fears.
 One saw your first sweet smile. The other dried your tears.
 One sought for you a home that she could not provide.
 The other prayed for a child and her hope was not denied.
 And now you ask me, through your tears,
 the age-old question unanswered through the years.
 Heredity or environment, which are you a product of?
 Neither, my darling. Neither. Just two different kinds of Love.

It is not a matter of nature versus nurture; I am a product of both. While I may look Korean and am expected to act as so, I am also American and sometimes forget that I am not Caucasian. 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, and despite the fact that I have not solved my dyadic existence completely, I am now proud to call myself a KAD.

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