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The Ethics of Reclaiming

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The Ethics of Reclaiming

I. Introduction

After a mother abandons her children, may she ever prove herself worthy to reclaim them?

Substitute “country” for “mother,” and therein lies a question central to interpreting the fifty-year history of a controversial modern practice: intercountry adoption. This practice is the modern phenomenon by which North American, European, and Australian families apply to receive young children from non-Western, often lesser-developed countries.

One country in particular, with the eleventh-largest economy in the world,¹ constitutes an exceptional case—my birthplace, South Korea. In examining my own identity as an adopted Korean American, I cannot avoid examining the ethics (or lack thereof) behind my birth country’s treatment of those who, abandoned by their family and neglected by the government, emigrated involuntarily to a different country. Although worthy of an entire academic field, I will for now set aside the ethical debate concerning intercountry adoption, and instead ask the original question, this time re-phrased: When, if ever, is it ethical for South Korea to attempt to reclaim the children it abandoned via intercountry adoption? I will base my answer on my own experience as an adopted Korean.

Not flesh of my flesh, nor bone of my bone, but still miraculously my own. Never forget for a single minute, you didn’t grow under my heart, but in it.

Adoption Creed

II. Who I am

I am a Midwest American. My Irish mother and French-Canadian father raised me in Hugo, a small town in the outer suburbs of St. Paul, Minnesota. Since childhood I have played hockey, camped in the north woods, and stared through car windows at miles of corn. My college roommate is from the East Coast and sometimes, when I evade confrontation or hide my anger, he complains that I'm "so Minnesotan."

I am a transnational adoptee. By "adoptee," I mean one who has experienced adoption—a series of losses and gains in which a person is relinquished by one family (and sometimes a culture) and re-claimed by another. By "transnational," I mean one who has experienced adoption across racial, ethnic, and cultural borders. The transnational adoption experience is neither unilateral nor unilinear; rather, as scholar Toby Volkman notes, it submerges multiple subjects into "ongoing, criss-crossing flows in multiple directions, in space that is both real and virtual."²

I am the son of multiple parents. My first parents, or birthparents, are faceless to me, hidden behind a thick fog of distance and time. During the summer of 1987, a twenty-one year-old young woman gave birth to me in a hospital in Jinju, South Korea. My adoption papers say she and my older birth father quarreled often with each other (over their own situation? over me?). In November of that year, my birthfather took full custody of me—a rarity in most Korean adoption cases. He tried to care for me but, after suffering great "anguish," decided he couldn't sustain such care. One November night he brought me to Eastern Child Welfare Society (now Eastern Social Welfare Society), one the four main South Korean adoption agencies.

I was ten months old then, and parentless. A woman who had three biological children cared for me; I now call her my foster mother. The papers say that when I was hungry I used to follow her into the kitchen, and utter joyful cries when she asked me if I wanted food. I still have

a photo of her, taken by the adoption agency. She is sitting in a red throne-like chair, holding me in her lap in front of wallpaper decorated with Snow White characters. Her eyes are two black pearls as she half-smiles for the camera. Years later, I would hear that no foster mother could avoid bursting into tears when the social worker took a child from her arms. I believe it.

At the age of fourteen months, I lay in the lap of a stranger seated on an airplane, destined for the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport. A home video shows church-dressed aunts, uncles, and cousins gathering in front of a window, waiting for my entrance. I appear in the arms of the escort, and a few seconds later my new mother and father are holding me. My (adoptive) family and I still celebrate that day, calling it my “anniversary” (other adoptees call it their “airplane day”). My mother still says my arrival marked the happiest day of her life.

I am an ethnic Korean, meaning that I share racial and, to some extent, cultural features with the South Korean people. As a youngster I attended Camp Chosŏn, a Korean culture camp located in Western Wisconsin. I first attended “Korean camp” at age six and continued through my middle school years. For one week each July, I played with Korean kids, sang Korean songs, and ate Korean food. As a day-camper I was fond of swimming in the St. Croix River with my Korean friends and practicing *taekwondo*.³ When I returned as a resident camper I admired the older kids and teenage counselors, and grew attracted to their American Eagle clothes and pretty Korean girlfriends. During one afternoon, a counselor spoke to us campers about his growth as a Korean American. Toward his talk’s end he posed the question, “Do you consider yourself more Korean or more American?” Chris answered American, Joel said Korean, Bitsy guessed both. I myself didn’t know what to say.

In 2006, after my first year of college, I entered what I now call my “Korean phase”—a phase still evident in my life. I began to feel I was neglecting my Korean past, and feared I

would never return to it unless I acted soon. So I acted—abandoning plans to study Spanish in Costa Rica, and enrolling in a Korean language course at the University of Minnesota.

Meanwhile, I landed an internship with *Korean Quarterly*, an English-language Korean American newspaper based in St. Paul. Soon I was speaking basic Korean and interviewing Korean War veterans, Korean American lawyers, and adoptive parents of Korean children.

During that summer, the newspaper’s editor invited me to practice with a Twin Cities Korean drumming troupe, called Shinparam. The group is comprised of Korean citizens (or “nationals”), adoptees, and adoptive parents. Since joining the group, I’ve performed in local parks, university museums, and on Chicago’s Bryn Mawr Avenue for the annual Korean Street Festival. Drumming has become for me a newfound passion and meditation form. Its flowing rhythms and perpetual interactivity help me move beyond pursuits of mere “Koreanness,” toward a broader, more holistic self-awareness.

As an overseas Korean adoptee, I belong to the world’s largest adopted ethnic diaspora—a global community⁴ of a reported 157,000⁵ and estimated 200,000-plus⁶ members. Many of us are full-grown adults, spanning three generations of emigrants. We all have grown up in middle or upper-class families, most who raised us as Christians or (in some cases) Jews. Although the media, adoption practitioners, and the South Korean government have often mistreated and misrepresented us, we are now standing as our own spokespersons. We have written novels and poems, produced films and made art, practiced law and, more recently, conducted research related to our own experiences. We are trying to understand our experiences and identities, both individual and collective.

I am a part of a fifty-year history of intercountry adoption in South Korea. Adoption as an intercountry practice did not emerge in Korea until the aftermath of the Korean War (1950-53), which orphaned around 100,000 Korean children.⁷ Despite a large humanitarian response from U.S. soldiers and charity organizations, Korean citizens largely ignored the mostly mixed-race children, reflecting the national resurgence of neo-Confucian ideals of singular bloodline and racial homogeneity.⁸ Between 1953 and 1960, approximately 3500 Korean orphans (the vast majority of whom were of mixed-race heritage) were adopted by mainly white American families.⁹

The second wave of adopted children consisted of mostly full-blooded Koreans born out of wedlock to poor women factory workers during the late 1960s and 70s “who relinquished their children for reasons of poverty and legitimacy.”¹⁰ Such women, as bearers of illegitimate children, faced strong social stigmas and often decided between adoption or abortion. Loosening sexual practices among young Korean women during the 1980’s created yet another adoptee generation. Since the 1990’s, most Korean adoptees young, working, and unwed Korean mothers who relinquish them largely due to lingering social stigmas against single mothers.¹¹

Anthropologist Eleana Kim has observed that South Korea conducts intercountry adoption policy and practice with high sensitivity to foreign opinion and fluctuations in its domestic economy.¹² In the 1970s, the country attempted to reduce foreign adoption levels when North Korea—whose military had systematically reabsorbed most its post-war orphans¹³—began accusing its southern neighbor of “selling Korean offspring for profit to Westerners.”¹⁴ During the 1988 Winter Olympics in Seoul, foreign newspapers echoed this sentiment, most notably in an editorial titled “Babies For Sale,” written by *Progressive* staff writer Matthew Rothschild. After peaking at more than 8600 in 1986, annual foreign adoptions fell to under 3,000 by 1990

and hovered around 2,000 until 1997, when an economic crisis hit the country and foreign adoptions rose by nine percent through 1998.¹⁵

South Korea remained the largest sending country of adoptees until the early 1990's, and still ranks fourth in the world in annual intercountry adoptions.¹⁶ Such a large-scale movement of people has attracted sustained controversy, especially since South Korea has emerged as a leading economic, political, and cultural player in the modern era of globalization.

Hoping to curb international criticisms that it was neglecting its overseas adoptees, the South Korean government passed Law No. 5313 in March 1997 to establish the Overseas Koreans Foundation (OKF). The foundation, a non-profit organization affiliated with the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, purposed “to further the rights and interests of Overseas Koreans and to deepen the [Korean] ethnic bond.”¹⁷

In 1998, OKF launched its inaugural “Summer Cultural Program” (unofficially named as “Motherland Tour”), which introduced returning adoptees to Korean culture in a week-long tour and education program. The foundation intended the program “to give internationally adopted Koreans a stronger connection to Korea and their Korean identity by providing opportunities to experience their motherland, its people, and culture”¹⁸ The participants—which have totaled nearly 470 over a ten-year period¹⁹—have come mainly from the U.S., but also from Canada, the Europe, and Australia.²⁰ In the past, OKF gave preference to adoptees who hadn't already visited Korea or participated in a similar program. However, in 2006, OKF opened admission to non-adopted representatives of overseas adoption organizations, in order to help the foundation improve its “policy making, planning, and evaluating of adoption issues.”²¹

I admit that as late as June 2007, I knew very little about OKF. All I knew at the time was that it had accepted me into its 2007 “Summer Cultural Program,” and that a month later I’d be seeing South Korea for the first time in twenty years.

For the transnational adoptee, who is the ‘real’ mother? And what might her beautiful picture look like?

David L. Eng

III. My return

Seoul met me with a gray face. As I rode on limo bus number thirteen toward the capital’s center, buildings and bridges looked as silhouettes against gray clouds. Windshield wipers cleared a half circle of fine silver mist, which stuck to my tinted window and formed a thin film upon the lightened asphalt below. The only color came from the taxis and the occasional sports car.

The monochromatic backdrop turned to dazzling gold as I entered the Ritz Carlton Hotel, one of two luxury accommodations OKF had made for us. From my room’s window seat I could view the northern side of Seoul, its skyline still gray but flashing with colored signs, billboards, and big-screen TV panels. As I traced my route on my Seoul map, I felt lucky, exhilarated, adventurous. Even if for just one week, I was now in Korea, my first home.

During the program’s opening dinner, Kwon Young-bin, Chairman of the sponsoring Gyeonggi Cultural Foundation, had weighty words to say to us participants:

And seeing you brings to mind the word "mother." The term mother holds significant meaning. "Mother" is our spiritual home and origin. As in the East, so in the West, "mother" has been used to express one's origins, just like "motherland" and "mother tongue" ... Even if it seems to be too late, we would like to let Korean adoptees know that they always have their motherland and that we will try hard for them to feel comfort here.²²

A motherland? I'd understood it as a metaphor representing a nation's love and concern for its returning members. I was curious to know why Mr. Kwon stressed that adoptees would "always have" their motherland. Why was this metaphor so important to Korean leaders? The welcome dinner soon ended, however, and I would not return to these questions until months later.

My fellow twenty-four participants came from the U.S., Canada, Australia, Luxembourg, Sweden, and Switzerland. Seven worked for adoption agencies, and the rest represented a variety of adoptee and adoptive parent organizations. Seven of us (including myself) were adoptees—some middle-aged professionals, others young college grads. I quickly befriended the two nearest my age.

Together, our group toured Korean art museums, parks, and shopping districts; we received lessons in Korean cooking and the traditional "way of tea"; we clapped to Korean percussion, sang nostalgic Korean songs, and tried our hand at Korean craft-making. In addition to our "cultural experiences," we also held various workshops and panels and shared our perspectives on adoption education, policy, and practice. By week's end we'd drafted a document giving recommendations for how OKF could improve its post-adoption services. I was proud of our group's achievements; yet the program, packed with 14-hour days and a flurry of activities, left me few opportunities to detach myself from my experience and reflect upon it.

Upon returning to Minnesota, I returned to my three part-time jobs, watched my brother's baseball games, and prepared for another college semester. When my friends or co-workers asked me "How as Korea?" I often gave one-word replies and told a few humorous anecdotes. I found I could describe my experience, but could not yet interpret it for myself.

A single 50-minute film changed all that.

"The slave's own narrative, while freeing the narrator in many ways, did not destroy the master narrative. The master narrative could make any number of adjustments to keep itself intact."

Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark

IV. My awakening

I didn't open the plastic-covered DVD until one September night in my college apartment. It bore the title "Coming Home: An Inevitable Quest For Answers" and was produced by OKF. I remembered the film as being one of the myriad objects which OKF had stuffed into the briefcase I'd received during my first day in Korea. I assumed it would constitute another sorry attempt to document adoptees' return to their birth country. I was correct, but the film did more—it revealed OKF's motives behind the Summer Cultural Program itself. It was the catalyst to transforming partial reflection into rigorous scrutiny.

"Coming Home" documents the 2005 Summer Cultural Program, the last to date in which only adoptees participated. The film opens with a plane touching down, presumably in Incheon International Airport. An English-speaking male voice with a North American media accent narrates the film's opening line: "Like salmon that return to the rivers where they were born, all of us once scattered throughout the world now return to our mother country."

Adoptees are like *salmon*? I asked out loud. And why is the narrator saying “us,” when he clearly is not an adoptee?

After sound bytes from a nervous but “really excited” adoptee from Germany and a handicapped adoptee from the U.S., the narrator continues: “The place which always shook our hearts with tingling images, the place where we were born but could not feel—we’ve returned to our home full of hope and yearning to return to our past.”

I sat on the edge of my futon. This narrator’s words were more than ambiguous—they constituted an attempt to *speak for* adoptees, displacing their individual voices with a governmental script. Furthermore, this script, as the film would soon reveal, overtly portrays adult adoptees as children.

While documenting the program’s orientation session, for example, the camera zooms in on Rebekah (Kim Hee-joo), one of the handicapped participants, while the narrator says, “This year’s program was all the more meaningful with handicapped adopted children and their parents as participants.” The voice flows even and casually, yet to me the word “children” screams as an outrageous insult. Rebekah is much older than me—and the film calls her a child.

A few scenes later, the participants are sitting at desks, taking careful notes while a man writes on a whiteboard. “We’re seeing the native alphabet for the first time,” the narrator says. “Like children, we’re learning it letter by letter.” Later in the day, the participants visit their respective adoption agencies and hold abandoned infants in their arms. The narrator says, “We were all speechless, lost in thought, thinking, ‘That was once me.’” This is likely a true observation, but the government is clearly thinking something similar—“That was once them.”

More subtle allusions to childhood sprinkle the film’s middle scenes. When the group eats lunch at a Korean restaurant, the camera zooms in on a participant struggling (like a child) to

use chopsticks. During a lesson in taekwondo (Korean martial arts), a female adoptee tries on pants (over her jeans) that are twice her size. At an arts and crafts session, the participants also cut and glue paper jewelry boxes, like elementary students.

The film, however, soon reverts to its unabashedly overt script. When introducing the group's entrance into the "Everland" theme park, the narrator says in a jolly tone: "Now it's time for us to all retrieve our childhood innocence." On the bus ride to another tourist site, the narrator describes the participants playing games "like students going on a field trip."

A few scenes give me hope that the film might at least partially succeed in portraying the group members as adults. For instance, the film documents a discussion panel of adult adoptees, while another features interviews of two respected adult adoptee organization leaders. At one point the first of these leaders says, "We (adoptees) want to be able to do things for ourselves and for each other." I wholeheartedly agree. This independence, this ownership of both experience and voice, is one of the adoptee's most fundamental pursuits.

Sadly, the film's conclusion confirms that the government's rendition of adoptees ultimately frustrates the latter's wish for independence: "We've become like children again in the warm heart of our motherland." How could the South Korean government possibly help adoptees assert their independence while portraying us as needy, *dependent* children?

The "Coming Home" film reveals, in mostly overt fashion, the Korean government's attempt to reclaim overseas adoptees as children of a metaphorical "motherland." Furthermore, as further investigation has revealed, this attempt substantiates the claim that Korea itself is a "gendered" nation, and one whose ideology seeks to build itself as a dominant economic and political power.

V. Conclusion

To the Overseas Koreans Foundation and all South Korean government officials:

You have proven yourselves unworthy of reclaiming any part of the Korean adoptee diaspora. In returning to their birth country, adult adoptees are searching for intimate union with a once-native land, language, culture, and family. They do not and ought not expect that country's government to treat them like children, and to disallow them from acting and speaking for themselves. I implore that you cease this attempt to reclaim adoptees over whom you exercise no real authority, and to do so by taking the following actions:

1. Discontinue the Summer Cultural Program, and re-allocate the funds to provide financial assistance for adoptees who wish but lack sufficient funds to visit Korea. When they arrive there, do not fill their schedules and shuttle us like tourists. Rather, allow them (within all legal parameters, of course) to experience their inaugural return in their own way and on their own terms. If they wish for guidance, provide it—but in a form completely void of sentimentalism, which needlessly complicates their journeys as adoptees.

2. Cancel the distribution of the “Coming Home” film. It is an insult to all adoptees who wish to assert their independence and express themselves freely. I personally invite you to speak with me, but I will protest all attempts to speak for me—that is, to drown out or otherwise misrepresent my voice. And remember that all adoptees have their own voices. They are not and never will be one homogeneous, pure-blooded, or otherwise single-faced body. Treat adoptees as the individual and unique persons that they are.

3. Remember that adoptees are not the only persons affected by adoption policy and practice. Attend first to South Korea's most vulnerable—to orphaned and abandoned infants, yes, but also to single mothers, financially troubled families, and the physically and mentally disabled. Give proper care to them regardless of whether doing so will beautify your national

image, boost your economy, or please lobbyists. Care for all your people as you would each care for yourselves.

I do not implore you as a one stranger to another. I have seen many of your faces in the flesh. I have received your bows, shaken your hands, and felt your embraces. Now, let us make those actions more than symbolic gestures—let us transform them into sincere, effective, and lasting social change.

You cannot reclaim our lives or voices, but you can reclaim our respect.

Notes

¹ Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Dept. of State, “South Korea (09/07),” <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2800.htm> (accessed Nov. 20, 2007).

² Toby A. Volkman, “Introduction: New Geographies of Kinship,” in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, ed. Toby A. Volkman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

³ Traditional Korean martial art.

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

⁵ Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, in *International Korean Adoptee Resource Book*, ed. Jeannie Hong (Overseas Koreans Foundation, 2006), 612.

⁶ Kim, Eleana, “Our Adoptee, Our Alien: Transnational Adoptees as Specters of Foreignness and Family in South Korea,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 80.2 (2007), 502.

⁷ Hubinette, Tobias, “Korean Adoption History,” in *Community 2004. Guide to Korea for Overseas Adopted Koreans*, ed. Eleana Kim, http://www.tobiashubinette.se/adoption_history.pdf (accessed Nov. 14, 2007).

⁸ Hubinette, Tobias, “Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of international adoption and adopted Koreans in Korean popular culture,” dissertation (University of Stockholm, 2005).

⁹ Kim, Eleana, “Adoption in Korea, Then and Now,” in *International Korean Adoptee Resource Book*, ed. Jeannie Hong (Overseas Koreans Foundation, 2006), 276.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹¹ Jeannie Hong, *International Korean Adoptee Resource Book* (Overseas Koreans Foundation, 2006), 619.

¹² Kim, Eleana. “Adoption in Korea, Then and Now,” in *International Korean Adoptee Resource Book*, ed. Jeannie Hong (Overseas Koreans Foundation, 2006) 276.

¹³ Bruce Cumings, email correspondence (Nov. 28, 2007).

¹⁴ Hubinette, Tobias, “Korean Adoption History,” in *Community 2004 Guide to Korea for overseas adopted Koreans*, ed. Eleana Kim (Overseas Koreans Foundation, 2004), http://www.tobiashubinette.se/adoption_history.pdf.

¹⁵ Kim, Eleana, “Adoption in Korea, Then and Now,” in *International Korean Adoptee Resource Book*, ed. Jeannie Hong (Overseas Koreans Foundation, 2006), 276.

¹⁶ Kim, Eleana, “Our Adoptee, Our Alien: Transnational Adoptees as Specters of Foreignness and Family in South Korea,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 80.2 (2007), 509, 527.

¹⁷ Jeannie Hong, *International Korean Adoptee Resource Book* (Overseas Koreans Foundation, 2006), 21.

¹⁸ Ibid., 23.

¹⁹ Ibid., 23. 2007 SCP had 25 participants.

²⁰ Ibid., 34.

²¹ Ibid., 34.

²² Eleana Kim, email correspondence (Aug. 19, 2007).