

ADULT KOREAN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTEES: A RESOURCE FOR ADOPTION PRACTICE

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The author shares a personal narrative of her efforts to establish an adult intercountry adoptee organization in New York City. These efforts coalesced with a national movement of adult intercountry adopted Koreans culminating in the Gathering of the First Generation of Adult Korean Adoptees, held in Washington, D.C. in 1999, and the Second Gathering in Oslo, Norway in 2001. The contribution of adult Korean adoptees to the field of intercountry and transracial adoption is discussed, with suggestions for how adult adopted persons can be utilized to enhance adoption prac-

Introduction

On January 13, 1903, the first Korean immigrants to the United States arrived in Honolulu, Hawaii, on the S.S. Gaelic. In commemoration, President George W. Bush issued a proclamation declaring January 13, 2003 as the “Centennial of Korean Immigration to the United States.” Throughout the year, programs, ceremonies, and activities honoring Korean immigrants and their descendants have been scheduled to celebrate the contributions of Korean-Americans over the past one-hundred years.

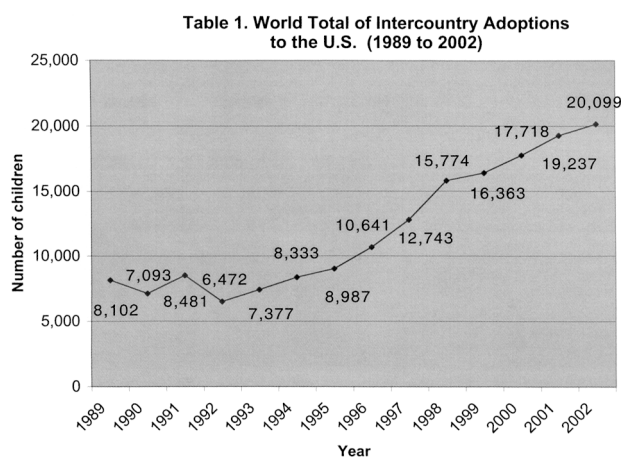
There was a time when I would not have identified with the millions of Koreans who risked everything for the hope of a new life in a new land. Like them, I was born in Korea and came to the United States with the hope of a better life. But unlike them, I did not travel with family or knowledge of my blood roots nor did I have to learn a new culture and language all on my own. My arrival to the United States at the age of three was eagerly awaited; I had become an American through adoption.

Trends in the Field of Intercountry Adoption

It is estimated that between 1955 and 1999, a total of 143,144 Korean children were placed for overseas adoptions worldwide (Holt Korea, 2003). Of these children, an estimated 100,008 were adopted by American families (U.S. State Department, 2003; Gathering, 1999). The first wave of Korean-born children adopted in the aftermath of the Korean war were pioneers, paving the way for the thousands of orphaned and abandoned children who are now adopted through intercountry adoption.

Currently, the practice of intercountry adoption involves the transfer of

an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 children from over 50 countries each year, with the United States receiving the largest number of the world's children (Masson, 2001; Lovelock, 2000). According to the U.S. State Department, the total number of foreign-born children adopted by U.S. citizens has increased by nearly 40 percent, from 8,102 children in 1989, to an estimated 20,099 children in 2002 (Table 1). Since 1995, the top four countries issuing visas for children migrating to the U.S. for adoption were China (Mainland), Russia, South Korea, and Guatemala (U.S. State Department, 2003).



Source: U.S. State Department: http://travel.state.gov/orphan_numbers.html

In the United States, many of the first waves of Korean adopted children are now professionals with a wealth of experience and knowledge to share with the new generation of intercountry adopted children. My efforts as a Korean adoptee to establish an adult intercountry adoptee organization in New York City coalesced with a national movement of adult intercountry adopted Koreans that culminated in the Gathering of the First Generation of Adult Korean Adoptees, held in Washington, D.C. in 1999, and the Second Gathering in Oslo, Norway in 2001.

Making Connections

Although I always knew I was born in Korea and adopted, I was not always conscious of what either meant. Growing up, being Korean described my physical appearance, explained where I came from, and made me unique from the rest of my family. As a teenager, I was made more con-

scious of looking Asian because people assumed, based on my physical appearance, that I spoke Korean or knew Korean culture. However, because I was raised by a non-Korean family I did not think of myself as Korean. I was a McGinnis. I felt that because of my appearance, people assumed I had knowledge of Korean culture. I felt like an imposter: I only knew American culture.

Despite how American I felt, my family could not tell me where I got my eyes, my artistic talents, or the shape of my face. Their love could not shield me from the questions or the puzzled faces of those who did not understand how a White couple could have an Asian daughter. Living in a society that places a primacy on biology, an adopted person cannot help but feel excluded and cheated for the lack of knowledge of his or her genetic roots. Lacking such knowledge, adopted people must find other kinds of connections.

My studies as an undergraduate connected me to the history of intercountry adoptions in the United States, which first began after World War II in response to the humanitarian needs and an altruistic response to displaced war orphans (Masson, 2001; Lovelock, 2000; Riley, 1997). Similar sentiments initially led to the adoption of foreign children after the Korean and Vietnam Wars (Masson; Lovelock). Latin America emerged as a significant relinquishing region for intercountry adoptions by the mid 1970s, followed by the former Soviet Union and China by the mid 1990s (U.S. State Department, 2003).

Also-Known-As

From my studies, I realized I was not alone. As I sought to reconcile my self-identity based on my adoption experience with the identity imposed by the racial stereotypes of my society, a conflict arose. I was only given two choices: Korean or American. The reality for me was that I was both. My Korean mother gave birth to my body, but my adoptive mother and father gave birth to my soul. The East gave me life, but the West taught me how to live it. I realized that as an individual I had little power to shift misconceptions regarding adoption, yet as a community, international adoptees could do much to shift perceptions of adoption and racial stereotypes.

In forming Also-Known-As, an organization for adult intercountry adoptees, in 1996, I wanted to gather fellow adult adoptees in order to celebrate our unique experiences and serve the younger generation of intercountry adoptees and adoptive families. Gathering as a community we could assert our unique culture as transracial and international adopted people and create a space in which we could embrace our unique identities. The name of the organization is a reflection of our self-identities and human experiences that are not apparent on the surface. I am Hollee McGinnis, also-known-as Lee Hwa Yong. In establishing the organization, I found a com-

munity outside of my adoptive family that shared a desire to make a difference with the unique lives we had been given.

Although we believed intercountry adoptees shared a common experience and sought to include adoptees from all countries, our first effort focused on connecting with Korean adoptees, who constitute the largest number of intercountry adoptees in the U.S. Our efforts coincided with previous efforts by adult Korean adoptees to establish organizations in Minnesota and Los Angeles. However, our organization was unique in that its primary goal was to establish post-adoption services informed by the experiences of adult adoptees. In addition, we were among the first organizations to utilize the Internet to connect with adopted people both nationally and internationally.

The Gathering of the First Generation of Adult Korean Adoptees

The Gathering of the First Generation of Adult Korean Adoptees, a three day conference held in September 1999 in Washington, D.C., was a momentous culmination in the development of the adult Korean adoptee community. This conference, sponsored by Holt International Children's Services, Also-Known-As, the Korea Society, and The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, brought together nearly 400 adults adopted from Korea between 1955 and 1985, representing over 30 U.S. states and several European countries (Gathering, 1999).

This conference was unique in its purpose to provide an opportunity for adoptees to share their experiences, bringing together the past, present, and future of Korean intercountry adoptions. To gain greater insight into the experiences of Korean adoptees, as well as to plan the conference itself, The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, in conjunction with Holt International Children's Services, surveyed the participants at the Gathering (Gathering, 1999). Participants discussed, in small groups based on birth years, topics such as reasons for participating in the conference, memories of Korea and arrival at their new home, impact of early experiences on adoptees' lives, discrimination, identity, dating and relationships, relationship to Korea, search and reunion, and perceptions of adoption. The conference concluded in the early dawn at the Korean War Memorial and was a testament to the shared suffering of a generation of Koreans who survived a war, were transplanted from their birth culture, and built new lives on foreign soil.

Since the Gathering, Korean adult adoptees have continued to meet at "mini-gatherings" throughout the country, new organizations of adult Korean adoptees have sprung up, and a plethora of websites now connect Korean adoptees throughout the world. A second Gathering, focused on bringing together Korean adoptees from Europe, occurred in Oslo, Norway

in July 2001.

Future Directions

Despite the increase in the number of intercountry adoptions, research in this field is limited. However, a growing body of work has begun to focus on factors influencing ethnic identity formation and development in intercountry transracial adoptees (Feigelman & Silverman, 1984; Trolley, Hansen & Wallin, 1995; Huh & Reid, 2000; Carstens & Juliá, 2000; Vonk, 2001). These studies of ethnic identity formation have consistently relied on adoptive parents to answer questions regarding the racial awareness and identity formation of their transracially adopted children. Although parents can provide accurate information about much of their children's conduct, it is difficult for them to provide data on all of their children's activities and feelings (Feigelman, 2000).

In addition, current studies on ethnic awareness have relied on the experiences of young adoptees rather than adoptees who are in adolescence or early adulthood—the age at which racial identification is most salient and recognition of one's racial and ethnic identity becomes most important (Feigelman, 2000; Hug & Reid, 2000). Thus, the importance of race may be underrepresented in these studies because of the relationship between racial identification and development. Although discussion of the results of the Gathering survey is beyond the scope of this paper, it is clear that the inclusion of adult adoptees' experiences and reflections of their identities would be invaluable to future studies on ethnic identity development over the lifespan.

Korean adult adoptees have already influenced the development of intercountry adoption practice. For example, Also-Known-As has a Speaker's Bureau where adult adoptees share their experiences of being adopted. While we realize that the experiences of the current generation of intercountry adoptees may be different from our own, we recognize that we have insights into growing up in transracial families that are valuable for prospective adoptive families.

Research supports that the adoptive family's sociocultural milieu, including minority role models, is a significant factor affecting ethnic identification of transracial adoptees (Zuñiga, 1991; Carstens & Juliá, 2000). Thus, we offer a mentorship program for intercountry adopted youth, providing minority role models who are also adopted. Adult adoptees have been influential in establishing culture camps and culture days for intercountry adoptive families, reflecting their own desires to have had opportunities to connect with their birth cultures growing up.

Today, Korean adoptees are traveling to Korea in unprecedented waves, seeking to experience their birth culture. By sharing their experiences in

film, memoir, and the arts, Korean adoptees are redefining what it means to be an adopted person. Adult Korean adoptees are leading experts into unexpected territories. Many Korean adoptees are actively searching for—and finding—birth parents, a prospect that many adoption professionals once assumed to be impossible.

Conclusion

Agencies need to be responsive to the life-long needs of Korean Intercountry Adoptees and can do so by partnering with adult adoptee organizations. The formation of these organizations is a response to the unmet needs of adult adoptees. Practitioners in the field of adoption often think their work is complete when the child is placed in the hands of a new family; however, this is just the beginning of a life-long journey of self-discovery.

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