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more than a Korean adoptee: making sense of identity and adoption in South Korea and adoptive countries

Jessica Walton

Introduction
What does it mean to be an intercountry adoptee raised in a family, usually with white adoptive parents, in a country which may see itself as a multicultural country but nevertheless views people who are not white as outsiders? Korean adoptees and other intercountry adoptees, often experience a sense of being 'out-of-place' or not quite belonging in their adoptive country or their birth country. While Korean adoptees are often assumed by other people to be from 'somewhere else', usually an 'Asian' country, they often identify more with the white 'Western' culture in which
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ey were raised rather than the country where they were born, mainly because it is what they know.

Recently, adoption studies in the social sciences have emerged that look at the ways adoptees think of their identities by considering the social and cultural context as well as specific historical and political factors. Based on in-depth interviews and field research conducted in Seoul in South Korea, this chapter contributes to this transition in adoption studies by focusing on the lived experiences of adult Korean adoptees as they negotiate issues of belonging, difference and identity.

In 2007, I went to Seoul to conduct fieldwork as part of my doctoral research at the University of Newcastle. I stayed at KoRoot, a guesthouse that provides affordable accommodation, resources and a support network for Korean adoptees. KoRoot is only open to Korean adoptees and their guests so as a Korean adoptee from the United States, I was able to live there while doing my research. Over the three months that I was there, I met and became friends with Korean adoptees from many different countries as they passed through during their travels. Of the Korean adoptees that I interviewed, most were adopted to Australia and the United States with a few from Sweden, Switzerland and Canada. In this chapter, pseudonyms are used for those that decided not to identify themselves using their actual names.

The Korean adoptees I spoke to were mainly raised by white parents in areas where the population was predominantly white. This chapter analyses how Korean adoptees think of 'difference' or 'otherness' given their experiences in their adoptive countries and South Korea. It also considers the creative ways Korean adoptees engage with what it might mean to be (more than) a Korean adoptee, in terms of their identity and sense of belonging.

'Where are you (really) from?'
A common question that Korean adoptees often face is 'where are you from?' While usually asked out of curiosity, this question
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primarily draws on socially constructed racial differences, which target particular physical attributes. Oftentimes, subsequent questions may unknowingly lead to insensitive probing about their personal background. Sarah, a Korean adoptee from Australia, expressed:

People tend to assume that I come from China or Japan, and often that forces me to just go along with it and not bother to correct them, or to reveal that I’m Korean. That’s when we get into dangerous territory! If the conversation keeps going, it usually means I will have to also reveal that I’m adopted. I resent doing that because it’s a very personal issue and no one else’s business.

These sentiments were also articulated by Brea, a Korean adoptee from the United States, ‘I get asked the question all the time. And usually I am not sure what to answer ... Sometimes I don’t want to answer the questions because I know more questions come and I hate answering them’.

This kind of everyday encounter is a reminder that Korean adoptees are seen as not belonging despite the fact they lived in their adoptive countries for the majority of their lives. It assumes that no matter where people are, their belonging will always be determined by the place where they were born. Thus, cultural identity is simplified and condensed to perceived racial differences that denote ‘otherness’. For example, a stranger at a tram stop commented on Mia’s Korean eyes and remarked, ‘wow, you have beautiful eyes. What’s your orientation?’ After recounting this incident in an interview, Mia stated, ‘I feel that it emphasises the fact that we look different. Isn’t Australia supposed to be a multicultural country? I don’t go around asking Caucasians what their orientation is.’

Other migrant groups and their descendents experience similar encounters when they are considered to be part of a ‘minority’ group based on physical differences. However, it is
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different for adoptees because they are alienated from their birth
country as well as their birth family. For example, they do not
necessarily grow up with the kind of immediate knowledge
that first generation Korean children may learn from Korean
family members, which would confirm some kind of familiar
connection to Korea. Because of their lack of knowledge, Korean
adoptees may not feel accepted by other groups of people with
Korean heritage. Kelly recalled:

I have tried going to a Korean church to try to belong but they
all spoke Korean and I do not speak Korean, only English.
Sometimes I would try to go to Asian or Korean picnics but still
felt like I was an outcast with the Koreans because I cannot speak
Korean.

Similarly, when Brea joined the Korean Student Association at her
university ‘everyone assumed I would fit in but I felt very out of
place because I knew nothing’.

Therefore, a question that addresses Korean adoptees’ origins
also assumes that they have some knowledge or experience that
would indicate a basic understanding of the culture, language
and social conventions where they are supposedly ‘from’. As
Ien Ang points out, ‘so long as the question where you’re from
prevails over where you’re at in dominant culture, the compulsion
to explain, the inevitable positioning of yourself as deviant vis-à-
vis the normal, remains’ (2001, p. 30). So whether or not Korean
adoptees in Australia feel they are from Australia—where they
are ‘really from’—will continue to be highlighted in terms of
prevailing ideas about belonging and identity.

Understanding identity
Rather than immediately assuming that identity is represented and
determined solely by someone’s racial differences, it is important
to look at the complex ways that identities are dynamic as well as
situated in everyday lived experiences (Lien and Melhuus 2007).
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This approach helps us to look at Korean adoptees' identities 'not [as] essentialised wholes', and instead views identity as a creative process that is worked through overtime (Kondo 1990, p. 46).

That said, there is a tendency to glorify people considered to have hybrid or multiple identities in a celebratory manner (Lo 2000). An example in adoption discourse is the term, 'rainbow family'. Rainbow families refer to families consisting of adoptive parents and children with various ethnicities. The family is imagined as a rainbow of many different colours united as one. This perspective celebrates diversity but also tends to overlook difference by drawing on the popular adage that love in a family is 'colour-blind'. This celebration of difference for the sake of diversity overlooks tensions within difference that adoptees often experience. As Hübinette (2007) points out, feeling 'different' and coming to terms with it is not always such an easy process and can be quite painful, traumatic and problematic.

It is not surprising that Korean adoptees often experience 'difference' around the time they attend school. During this time, they learn that they are 'different' because their Korean physical features set them apart from their peers. This difference is then frequently experienced in negative ways, which include derogatory racial slurs, taunting, gestures such as pulling at the corners of the eyes to make them slant, and other forms of psychological and physical bullying. In order to try to fit in, Korean adoptees learn at an early age that belonging is associated with whiteness and therefore they often feel that in order to belong, they have to become white. Todd grew up in country New South Wales and recounted, 'when I was younger, I was always bullied by other people because I was Asian ... I really wished that I was a Caucasian person so that I would fit in with everyone. I felt like I didn't belong'. Moreover, it meant not emphasising a Korean identity. As Hee Su asserts, 'I really tried to not be Korean. You know I really tried so hard to dress white, to act white, to be white ... and to emulate everything that is to be white middle class Canadian'.
In this context, Korean adoptees internalise what whiteness represents, that to be white means to be normal, to belong, thus carrying with it a sense of ‘invisibility’ (Dyer 1997). Therefore, having a Korean identity is considered undesirable because it reinforces difference, already evident by their physical difference. Kelly who was adopted to the Midwest in the United States commented, ‘I wanted to be white so bad growing up. I did not like being Korean’. Todd reiterated the perception that whiteness is associated with normality, ‘when I was about eight years old, that’s when people started to tease me about my appearance, and that’s when I really hated my appearance. I think I wished everyday that I was a white person, a normal person’. In the process of trying to reconcile a white identity with their surroundings, Korean adoptees become ‘strangers to their own bodies’ (Hübinette 2007, p. 150).

Being in Korea
Conversely, when Korean adoptees go to South Korea, their Korean bodies are no longer what make them appear different but what allow them to feel a sense of anonymity and sometimes, a sense of belonging. In Korea, adoptees like Steph, often say they feel they belong in a way that they do not feel they belong in their adoptive countries. ‘In Australia, I often feel like I don’t belong, especially when I’m in a room full of Caucasian people. But in Korea, I just blended in with everyone else. It was a nice feeling’. However, for adoptees with multiracial backgrounds, the possibility of blending in seamlessly with the rest of the population is not as easy and can be a source of deep anxiety. Marah, a Black Korean adoptee who grew up in the United States said, ‘In my experience many Korean people won’t even acknowledge that I am in fact Korean because I am black’. Clearly, who counts as Korean is based on certain discriminating criteria that only include particular physical characteristics. So even though most adoptees do feel like they belong based on shared physical appearances, many other adoptees are also excluded.
Initially, adoptees may go to Korea in the hope of finding a sense of belonging that is consistent with their bodies. However, once in Korea, it can become quickly apparent that they do not necessarily fully belong there either. As Matt explained, 'I am not Korean enough to be considered to be Korean because I am not completely fluent and I stick out like a sore thumb when I am in Korea'. Consequently, complete belonging in Korea or in their adoptive countries is often realised as something that cannot be fulfilled. Barbara Yngvesson proposes that '[the] birth country is ... a powerful site where the potential and the impossibility of full belonging may be experienced' (2005, p. 37). Indeed, for many, there is a power in this ability to return and to exist in a country that continues to send its children away for intercountry adoption (ICA). In contrast to their adoptions, when the decision was not theirs, these trips are often made through their own initiatives.

However, for Korean adoptees like Marie, belonging is not necessarily the main focus. Instead, it is about making that Korean identity a more understood part of the self.

If you think of your life as a puzzle or you have this piece missing then, say all the pieces are green for example. Then this piece you know is empty because we don’t know who our mothers are or our fathers or siblings or aunts and uncles but just being in Korea almost shades in maybe a really light green, you know like for every time you come back maybe it gets a little bit more green. You can never get completely green as all the other ones but it can fill a little bit of the void so I think that’s the power, for me, knowing that it’s pretty much impossible for me to find my parents but being here helps that.

Therefore, it is not so much that Korean adoptees have an ‘imagined belonging’ (Howell 2007, p. 33). Rather, while they may initially have an imagined sense of belonging associated with Korea before they go back, it does not necessarily have the
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same relevance once they are actually there. Frequently, cultural differences and language barriers are too difficult to overcome.

However, what is often overlooked in these discussions about belonging and what could actually be more telling, is the importance for Korean adoptees to experience Korea for themselves. It seems that rather than focusing on whether or not Korean adoptees can ever feel like they fully belong, a more compelling discussion can be had about the significance of being in Korea. This is especially relevant when considered in terms of their identities. As Matt expressed:

Even though I haven't fully figured out who I am, just going to Korea, just being there where it all started does something. I can't describe it that well, but there's something about just being there physically and seeing it. Seeing with your own eyes, where you came from, standing there with your own feet, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching. All of that does something in helping me discover a little more about myself.

Just being in Korea is a powerful statement and hugely significant because it is also the adoptees' choice to be there. When the focus is shifted, Korea becomes not so much a place to belong but a place to be in, to experience.

Being (more than) a Korean adoptee
For adoptees, being in Korea is not only about understanding their identities; it can also offer a chance to meet other adoptees that have also returned to Korea. While I lived at KoRoot, the communal atmosphere of the guesthouse provided a comfortable space in which adoptees could share their stories with each other. While talking with other adoptees, special connections formed between complete strangers in a short period of time. There was a sense of common understanding and shared belonging based on the fact that we were all adopted with a connection to Korea. Importantly, although we experienced different life trajectories
after leaving Korea, there were also similar feelings and emotions about identity and belonging. It became apparent that instead of finding belonging in a particular place, belonging could be found through mutual understanding between people. Whether in their adoptive country or in South Korea, sharing experiences with other adoptees can offer a more implicit kind of understanding.

Many adoptees express that the kind of immediate understanding and empathy they feel with other adoptees is unique. They reason that 'non-adoptees' cannot fully grasp what it is like to be adopted. As Marah noted:

It is nice to find other people out there who have the same feelings as you and can really and truly understand what you go through. People who are not adopted can never know what it's like to not know who you are and where you came from.

Furthermore, there is a different kind of communication between adoptees because of this implicit understanding. Steph explained how she felt when she shared her story with other adoptees:

For most of my life I had a craving to be fully understood by someone else, and by talking to other adoptees, I felt this kind of comfort and contentedness to just sit back and think, 'yes, this person understands me'. There was no need to explain myself to the extent I need to with non-adoptees ... adoptees just knew how I felt. It was very refreshing to not be misunderstood.

This implies that a basis for understanding is already there so feelings, emotions and thoughts do not need to be overly explained to try to elicit understanding. Young Mi commented on this experience after she became involved with an adoptee organisation in Australia, 'it was just kind of comforting and something new to be around people who instinctively understood my situation and didn't have to ask stupid questions or make unfounded assumptions about me'.
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While these strong connections are important, I do not wish to imply that all adoptees experience the same depth of connection or any connection at all for that matter because this is not always the case. Being adopted is certainly not the only aspect of a person’s life experiences, personality and identity. However, as some argue, being able to share experiences about being adopted is incredibly significant even while it is not the only distinguishing factor that connects people to each other. Pia commented:

Although our lives, personalities and so on are often very different, we have a shared experience that is unique. I’m not saying I get along with adoptees better than non-adoptees just because we’re adopted ... There’s just an understanding that you don’t have with non-adoptees of where you’ve been and sometimes where you are (emotionally) now.

These connections that adoptees talk about and this oftentimes inexplicable feeling of mutual understanding characterise a sense of belonging through shared histories and shared experiences.

Based on these shared aspects, the communities and groups adoptees create such as at KoRoot could be an example of what Malkki refers to as ‘accidental communities of memory’ (1997, p. 91). She explains that ‘it is the communities that are accidental, not the happenings’ and it is this ‘indeterminacy ... [that brings] people together who might not otherwise, in the ordinary courses of their lives, have met’ (1997, p. 92). The ICA program began in South Korea as a result of the Korean War (1950–53) and since then there have been different reasons for continuing the program to the present day, such as social stigma against people with multiracial backgrounds, poverty, extramarital pregnancies and discrimination toward single mothers. Since the program’s inception, over 150,000 Korean adoptees have been dispersed around the globe. What draws Korean adoptees together is partly due to this common beginning in the sense that their lives were
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irrevocably changed and affected by these social conditions and historical circumstances.

Places such as KoRoot are spaces in which 'accidental communities of memory' are created as Korean adoptees from different countries form relationships with each other based on this common aspect of their lives. Within such spaces, stories are often exchanged and an unspoken understanding permeates the conversations. As Hanna remarked, 'even though I do not get equally well along with all Korean adoptees, I still feel we are connected'.

Therefore, based on these common aspects, Korean adoptees often feel a sense of belonging through connections with other adoptees. In this way, 'Korean adoptee' is used as a marker of solidarity and as a form of empowerment to campaign for certain issues and rights for adoptees (Trenka, Oparah and Shin 2006). However, although Korean adoptees share a common connection, they are also diverse people and sometimes resist being defined solely as an adopted person from Korea. This does not undermine the important sense of shared identity and belonging created by reclaiming the term 'adoptee', but it does point out that Korean adoptees are 'more than' any category which attempts to define them. In this sense, Korean adoptees are also 'more than Korean adoptees'.

Throughout this discussion, I have chosen to use the term Korean adoptee because it is useful to refer to this diverse group of people. However, by also challenging the term, 'Korean adoptee', I wish to emphasise that Korean adoptees are not simply defined by their adoptee status and instead, resist being pigeonholed into any category that may overlook their multifaceted identities. Natacha commented, 'we are not [all the same] ... I don't speak with an adoptee, I don't speak with you or another [person]. I speak with [you] ... as a human'. While what it means to be an adoptee varies in relevancy depending on the person, Marie added, 'I'm not just an adoptee. You know, I'm a lot of other things too'. Furthermore, Korean adoptees think about their connection with Korea differently. As Nate explained:
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In a way, I almost search for a connection with adoptees until they turn out to be the type that are just totally oblivious that they're Korean and don't want anything to do with it and then they basically shut you out. But yeah in general, I feel if they're aware, I do feel comfortable [around] Korean adoptees and do feel a connection.

For these reasons, it is important to recognise not only the shared experiences between adoptees but also their individual experiences and their diversity as people.

Therefore, although Korean adoptees share common experiences, it does not necessarily entail an automatic connection just because they were adopted. While there is this connection, they are also just as diverse as any other group of people. Brea commented, 'I feel the most comfortable around my Korean adoptee friends but I don't get along with all Korean adoptees. Many of them I have a hard time getting along with because I feel we grew up with such different backgrounds'. Marie also pointed out that because she was adopted in the 1970s when adoption agencies did not keep adoption papers that were as comprehensive as those for children adopted after the 1980s, she feels a stronger connection to people who are in the same age group as her. 'I feel a greater connection to the people, to adoptees that were born during the 70s than I do with the 80s, just because we were more the first batch'.

Additionally, there are different experiences depending on the adoptive country. For example, adoptees living in more multicultural countries such as Australia and the United States where there are significant Korean migrant populations would have different experiences to those who were raised in Scandinavian countries such as Norway and Sweden, where there is less possibility for diversity. Furthermore, within countries such as the United States, it also depends on whether the area was mostly rural or near an urban centre. Marie explained:

It's not like we're all the same. You know the Belgians or the Norwegians or the Americans or the Australians. I mean, we all
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grew up completely different. We might have one experience that is fairly similar and that I guess connects us in some way but after that it comes down to personality.

In this sense, the different trajectories that Korean adoptees' lives took after they were adopted out of Korea indicate that their lives were randomly decided for them. Hee Su conveyed this indeterminacy, 'I could have been anywhere in the world. Like you could spin the globe and point your finger and that's where my home could have been so it was really cool to meet people who landed somewhere else in the world'. Korean adoptees were all born in Korea but after that, their identities were shaped in ways that were a result of the ICA process.

At KoRoot these differences became more apparent especially when people spoke multiple languages. People tended to connect more with others from the same adoptive country because of shared language and other similarities in addition to being adopted. Natacha lived at KoRoot for an extended period of time and one of the things she liked to do was to observe the differences between adoptees. 'What is interesting here is that all these persons are originally Korean but ... a Swedish adoptee is so different from a French adoptee and I like to point out why, why they are different, you know?' For Hee Su, these differences challenged the idea that she would feel an unspoken connection with people just because they were adopted from Korea. She spoke about some of her interactions with other adoptees while she stayed at KoRoot.

If I was only with the people that I'm here with kind of, I would feel probably twice as lonely as if I were just alone because they're just so different than who I am and then I'm like am I weird to be an adoptee and not identify with these other adoptees, you know, does it make me twice an outsider?

There is an expectation that adoptees should automatically get along with other adoptees because of this common bond, but this
bond is not a natural bond—it is something that is dependent on other factors as well. Therefore, it is necessary to recognise the different ways Korean adoptees understand their identities that are not limited to their adoptee status. By acknowledging this, tendencies to generalise adoptees’ experiences are challenged. This is important because oftentimes in public discourse, adoptees are represented in ways that characterise their experiences one-dimensionally as ‘lucky’, ‘successful’, ‘angry’ or ‘negative’. These representations mask the rich texture of their lived experiences and the diversity which characterises adoptees.

Conclusion

Identity and belonging are often understood within conventional frameworks, which do not always acknowledge their complexity in terms of how they are experienced. For Korean adoptees, issues of identity and belonging are not taken for granted. Instead, ideas about ‘whiteness’, ‘Koreanness’ or ‘adopteeness’ are re-conceptualised and given new meaning based on their lived experiences.

Additionally, identifying as a Korean adoptee can create a sense of solidarity through their common experiences. At the same time, they also attribute different meaning to being adopted and so as diverse people, they are also ‘more than’ just Korean adoptees. Importantly, what this means is an ongoing process. As Sarah reflected:

At this stage of my life anyway, to identify myself as Korean is probably more important to me than to identify myself as Australian. Further along in my ‘discovery’ of Korea, however, I’m aware that I may find myself disillusioned by the cultural gap and quite happy to be just Australian. Who knows.

Finally, as Anne so clearly articulated, ‘what I am is a little different but just as valid as anything’.
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