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Caught Between Two Worlds: Insights Into the Experiences of International Adoptees

There have been over 210,000 children adopted from Korea and China in the United States since 1953 (Off. Child. Issues), and I myself am one of them. It is a unique experience being a transracial international adoptee, that is, being a person of color born in one country but being adopted by a family, usually Caucasian, in another country. Being adopted from Korea is an important part of who I am, as a 17 year old growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area. Yet it is something that people at my high school often don't know about me. When classmates discover that I am adopted, they are often hesitant to ask questions, but if they do, they usually ask, "Have you ever met your parents?" or "Do you ever want to meet your parents?" When people think of adoption, they often envision an Oliver Twist kind of scene of children growing up in a dingy orphanage with abusive caretakers. However, a vast majority of children adopted from China and Korea were below the age of two at the time of adoption, so they have little to no recollection of their time before adoption. Throughout my life, I have known many adoptees, but I have only ever spoken to one about our experiences growing up. I wanted to find out from adult international adoptees how it was for them growing up in America. I was able to interview three adoptees, Laura aged 29 adopted from China, Paula aged 44 adopted from Korea, and Jay aged 54 adopted from Korea.

Adoptive Family. Before the interviews, I had assumed that transracial international adoptees grew up knowing that they were adopted, because the “vast majority of transracial adoptive parents are White. When White families adopt children of color, the family instantly becomes visible due to the obvious physical differences between the child and their parents” (Fry 62). But not all of the adoptees I interviewed were adopted by parents who were both White. Like myself, Paula grew up as an ethnically Korean child with Caucasian adoptive parents. But Laura and Jay each had one adoptive parent who was the same race as them. Laura grew up as an ethnically Chinese child with a Caucasian adoptive mother and a Chinese adoptive father. Jay grew up as an ethnically Korean child in an adoptive family with a Korean mother and a Caucasian father. From a very young age, Paula, Laura and I grew up knowing we were adopted. Laura said, “... it was almost like a going to bed story. Instead of prayer they would tell us the adoption story. So we knew since we had our earliest memories that we were adopted.” It was surprising to hear from Jay, whose adoptive mother is Korean that, “I didn't know I was adopted until the 7th grade when I had to do a family tree and my parents finally broke the news.” While I would have thought his learning this at the age of 12 would have been a difficult age to learn such a thing about himself, it didn't appear to have as adverse an effect on Jay as I would have expected. He went on to state that, “I remember crying uncontrollably that night. However, things were back to ‘normal’ the next day. My [adoptive] parents stressed that, to them, their love for me had nothing to do with biological vs. adopted, and I think that fundamentally, I felt that. My parents treated me as if I was their biological child, identical to my sisters (their biological children).”

Fitting In. All three adoptees felt that they had not fit in or had been bullied in some way when they were young, whether it was being subject to stereotypes about their race or outright bullying. Both Paula and Jay grew up in primarily Caucasian areas and were singled out for being Asian. Paula mentioned that, "There was definitely a stereotype of 'you must be good at math'. I was actually horrible at math." Jay also stated that, "I was always teased and always felt out of place, but I don't think it was any more or less than what most kids go through growing up... Pretty standard stuff; kids can be cruel. No one knew I was adopted, so I was never teased about that." These kinds of experiences are somewhat commonplace in areas where there is an Asian minority. Even I have been teased about things like the shape of my eyes. However it was surprising to hear Laura express how, despite growing up in the racially diverse San Francisco Bay Area, she still faced racism as a child. Laura's most painful experience of bullying was at her Chinese school. She said, "When I was in elementary school, my mom and my dad thought that the best thing for me was to be enrolled in a Chinese school, which turned out to be the four worst years of my life. The kids were extremely cruel, the teachers were really cruel. They just saw me as being Chinese and they were, 'Why don't you speak Chinese, everyone speaks Chinese'... So I was often alienated by the teachers and kids, or they would trick me into speaking English so I would get into trouble with the teachers and then it escalated to physical bullying..." It was interesting to hear that Laura's situation was not the typical story about being teased about being Asian by a Caucasian majority, but being singled out for not being Chinese enough. "This phenomenon is known as the transracial adoption paradox. ...they may feel caught between two worlds – the White one in which they were raised, and the one they have never known. Adoptees are expected to meet society's expectation for what their race

“should” be while being simultaneously rejected by these ethnic groups who view them as inauthentic.” (Fry 66)

The Search for Birth Parents. One of the main questions I get as an adoptee concerns people's assumption of a desire for an adoptee to meet his or her birth parents. Speaking for myself, I have never felt the need to meet either of my birth parents. Some adoptees say their desire to meet their birth parents "stems from a sense of incompleteness" within their identity (Tan 65). While there are plenty of adoptees who wish to meet their birth parents, the adoptees I interviewed were not extremely interested in finding their birth mother or father. They only started to have an interest in their biological family as they got to the stage in their life of having their own children. Laura who has always known that she has biological family and older siblings in China said, "It never was a priority but now that I'm 29, and married, and thinking about having kids, it starts me thinking about, 'Hey, I have three older siblings. I wonder what they look like. I wonder what their kids look like. I wonder what medical problems we have. I wonder what the kids would look like'". Paula said of looking for her biological family in Korea, "I have considered it to determine if I have any siblings and if they have any children... It would be nice for my kids to have cousins. In addition, a medical history would be good. However, I don't feel connected to that part of my past - so have not taken any steps." Jay said that he views his birth parents "on the same terms as some long lost distant relatives" in that he never had any real desire to meet them or get to know them. He went on to say, "I think I quickly reconciled that the people around me and the relationships I had with my adopted parents

were what mattered the most.” So at present, none of the four of us have had that burning desire to find birth family that some adoptees experience.

Identity. It is common that “internationally adopted children who, being born in one country but raised in another, must find themselves in a bind when defining who they are and where they belong” (Tan 61). So my last question for the adoptees was how they identify, (1) as Chinese or Korean, (2) as American, (3) as Chinese-American or Korean-American or (4) as an international adoptee. Laura described the difficulty of cultural identity for transracial international adoptees. She said, “I’ve had Asian friends... tell me ‘You’re not Chinese’, and their reasoning was... ‘You’re not from our culture. You don’t understand the culture, you don’t understand the language’... I understood what they meant, ‘culturally you’re not Chinese’. So now I just say that I’m Asian-American because then you’re not claiming any culture.” Like Laura, I also consider myself Asian-American. Jay stated, “I identify myself as American, but with a very strong Korean heritage. That would make me Korean-American.” Paula identifies as American. We each have a different story but in the end, we all feel similar in the way we identify ourselves.

I am grateful to Laura, Paula, and Jay for sharing their stories with me. There are more than 210,000 other stories from all of the transracial, international adoptees adopted from Korea and China to the United States, stories involving not fitting in, the desire to meet birth parents, and having an identity caught between two worlds.

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