

On Asian Transnational Adoptees' Self-Determination for Cultural Identification

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Abstract.

Transnational adoption from Asian countries to the US has started since the 1950s. American military intervention in Asian regions after the World War II has resulted in the birth of mixed race children. They were born of Asian women and American servicemen, and some ended up becoming orphans. These mixed race orphans often became the targets of racism in Asian countries. Knowing their plight, the US government issued the Orphan Section of the Refugee Relief Act of 1953, and accepted four thousand mixed race orphans. After this, the US has continued to adopt many Asian children.

When Asian transnational adoptees first came to the US, they were encouraged to assimilate into white American cultures because many were adopted by white Americans, yet due to the spread of the ideal of incorporating adoptees' ethnic background in parenting for the adoptees' healthy identity development in the US, white parents have started encouraging their adopted children to know their Asian cultural roots. While white parents are trying to give their adopted children either American culture or Asian culture, what do Asian adoptees feel about their cultural identification? Isn't it Asian adoptees themselves who need to decide their cultural identification?

This presentation will examine these questions by reading Greg Leitich Smith's *Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo*. Smith is an adoptee from Japan, and the book has a character like Smith himself. Smith explores the questions of self-determination of the Asian adoptees' cultural identification in the book. I will discuss the relationship of self-determination of the Asian adoptees' cultural identification and their well-being.

Keywords: Asian transnational adoptees in the US; self-determination; cultural identification; Asian American literature

1. Introduction

Transnational adoption from Asian countries to the US has started since the 1950s. American military intervention in Asian regions after World War II resulted in the birth of mixed race children. They were born of Asian women and American servicemen, and some ended up becoming orphans. These mixed race orphans often became the targets of racism in Asian countries. Knowing their plight, the US government issued the Orphan Section of the Refugee Relief Act of 1953, and accepted four thousand mixed race orphans. After this, the US has continued to adopt many Asian children.

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2. Transnational adoption in the US

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the US adopted 1622 children transnationally in the fiscal year 2020 according to the Annual Report on Intercountry Adoption issued by the Department of State. 659 children out of 1622, roughly 40% of children are from Asian countries such as China, South Korea, India, the Philippines, etc. The US' intercountry adoption hit its height in 2004, and the country adopted about 23,000 children. Since then, the number of intercountry adoption has been decreasing for various reasons, but the practice has tenaciously continued.

Reasons behind the decrease of intercountry adoption include the accusations of baby selling, and other problematic child adoption practices have led some sending countries to shutter their programs. Nevertheless, the practice has continued, and children transnationally adopted by American adoptive parents need to adjust to their new life in the US.

Antony Blinken, Secretary of the State mentions in the Annual Report on Intercountry Adoption that "we strongly believe that intercountry adoption must remain a viable option for these children when it is in their best interests." On the other hand, some critics point out the systematic problems of intercountry adoption. For example, E.J.Graff contends,

The international adoption industry has become a market often driven by its customers. Prospective adoptive parents in the United States will pay adoption agencies between \$15,000 and \$35,000 (excluding travel, visa costs, and other miscellaneous expenses) for the chance to bring home a little one (35).

Graff continues her criticism that because some Westerners pay lots of money for adoption, the adoption has become a profitable industry in developing countries. For money, some people in developing countries even kidnap infants, and medical doctors force poor mothers to give up their babies in exchange of medical fees (43). In adoption, children in needs such as "sick, disabled, traumatized, or older than five" (34) are the ones who should be

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adopted, but prospective American parents only request healthy toddlers. Due to these inhuman practices involving intercountry adoption, some sending countries stop intercountry adoption.

Although Blinken writes that intercountry adoption is for the “best interests” of children in need, some transnational adoptees have started their pain of adoption. For example, 30 Korean transnational adoptees and 10 birth mothers hosted a rally in 2007. They demanded Korean government (South Korea is one of the biggest adoptee sending countries in Asia) to stop adoption because “overseas adoption leaves deep-rooted scars both on the birth mothers and the children” (Young-gyo, 129). Thus, obviously, transnational adoption is not for the best interests of some Asian transnational adoptees.

What kind of deep-rooted scars does intercountry adoption leave in the mind of adoptees? Sherrie Eldridge, herself an adoptee and adoption counselor, writes the pain of adoptees.

Many adoptees feel false guilt over the painful loss of the birth family, over which they had no control. They often feel guilty just for being alive, and they cringe when they hear the words illegitimate or bastard (11).

In addition to the pain of the loss of the birth family, for Asian transnational adoptees in the US, who are usually transracially adopted, in other words, Asian children adopted by white parents, their pain gets more complicated because of their racial difference from their adoptive white parents.

Kim Park Nelson, an anthropologist researching on Korean transnational adoption, and herself Korean transnational adoptee, explains that from the 1960s to the 1980s, white adoptive parents used to expect their Asian transnational adoptees not to be marred by racial difference, but their color-blind attitude was actually forcing their adopted children to assimilate into white cultural norms. Nelson writes,

In a society where the dominant culture is White and non-White are of-color, to have no race is effectively to be White. Parents who described themselves or their children as raceless were likely attempting to protect their families from the difficulties of difference, but in creating an imagined racelessness, they were unwittingly whitewashing their children (82).

Asian transnational adoptees are trying to assimilate into white norms because of their white parents' expectation, but it is obvious that they cannot be white. While Asian transnational adoptees are embraced as white in their household, they are constantly racialized as Asians outside of the house. Some even experience racism in American society. This incongruence between the house and society, between their true skin color and parents' imagined skin color of theirs causes pain in the mind of Asian transnational adoptees.

Because of the incongruence and pain, some Asian transnational adoptees develop behavioral and mental problems. Child psychological development experts Karyn Purvis etc.,

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lists the adoptees' problematic behaviors such as irritability, antisocial behaviors, anger, rage, aggression, dissociation, withdrawal, crying, sadness, lethargy, and depression (43).

Some Asian transnational adoptees report the pain deriving from cultural identity problems. For example, Jane Jeong Trenka, herself an Asian transnational adoptee raised in Minnesota, writes of her identity problem arising from her racial difference from her white parents in her novel, *The Language of Blood*.

I wanted my head to be removed, a metaphor so strong that only later did I realize that it was not a death wish at all. I dreamed about it, fantasized about it, imagined the mercy of a guillotine. My body was separated from my mind in a dualism so ridiculous that I almost flew apart at the shoulders. What I longed for was wholeness, for my body to be as white and northern Minnesota as my mind (237).

In order to ease adoptees from their pain, some scholars point out the importance of incorporating Asian transnational adoptees' cultural origin in their everyday life for their healthy identity development. A psychologist Richard Lee writes,

Adoptive parents who deny or overlook racial and ethnic differences between parents and child, for example, may be more likely to engage in cultural assimilation parenting strategies, which in turn, may contribute to poorer mental health. By contrast, adoptive parents who acknowledge and accept racial and ethnic differences may be more likely to engage in enculturation and racial inoculation parenting strategies, which in turn, may contribute to more positive racial/ethnic identity development and mental health (10).

The knowledge about how to nurture Asian transnational adoptees' healthy identity development has spread among adoptive parents, and Shohei's parents, a protagonist of Greg Leitich Smith's *Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo*, are not exception. Next, I will read the text and discuss Asian transnational adoptees' cultural identification.

3. Analysis of Greg Leitich Smith's *Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo*

Set in Chicago, *Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo* has three seventh-grade narrators, Honoria, Elias and Shohei. They have been good friends but their friendship becomes awkward when Elias has a crush on Honoria, who has a crush on Shohei, who wants to help Elias win Honoria. The novel offers an interesting coming-of-age story, but this paper focuses only on Shohei and his relationship with his Irish American adoptive parents.

After reading "The Urgency of Exposing Cross-Culturally Adopted Children to the Ancestral Cultures of their Biological Parents" in *the Journal of Cultural Wellness and Pediatric Anthropology*, (the article is of course fictional) Shohei's parents, wealthy Irish Americans, suddenly started "Japanization effort" (28, 30).

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The parents' Japanization efforts include to cook Japanese food every day (11), socializing with other Asian transnational adoptees, to have Shohei take Japanese-culture-related classes, and to decorate Shohei's room with Japanese items as follows:

Now, a bunch of three-foot-by-three-foot tatami mats covered the floor and one wall had a wood-framed grid of rice paper. My bed had been replaced with this tatami thing that looked kind of like a coffee table, and the rest of the furniture was sort of short and came from Olaf of the Orient: A Fusion of West and East. Oh, and my framed and autographed World Cup soccer and Chicago Cubs posters had been replaced by a bamboo scroll and a silk print of a big wave with Mount Fuji in the background (29).

The parents' Japanization efforts baffle Shohei, and he tells them,

I'm interested in Japan and stuff, which is why I'm still taking Nihongo as my Asian language elective, but I like a lot of other things, too. Besides, it's not like I'm genetically programmed to worship the emperor, or anything (30).

To this, his mother reacts as follows:

My mom got a little teary and clasped my hands in hers. "Your ancestors are speaking to you," she said. "We're going to help you hear" (31).

Shohei reluctantly accepts the parents' Japannizatoin efforts. Asian transnational adoptees tend to accept their adoptive parents' expectation docilely and suppress their true feeling. It is because they were saved by benevolent white American parents and they need to appreciate the kindness. Asian transnational adoptees, Julia Chinyere Opara, Sun Yung Shin, and Jane Jeong Trenka explain this "self-censorship" tendency of Asian transnational adoptees as follows:

Some of us feel pressured to censor our own pain as an act of loyalty toward our adoptive families, fearing that it would cause them too much pain if we express our feelings of loss and grief (10).

Shohei may hesitate to hurt his adoptive parents' feeling so he cannot reject their Japanization efforts. He is upset that they replaced his cherished sport club posters, but he supresses his true feeling. He talks to himself that

I was supposed to be celebrating, or whatever, my Japanese heritage. But my parents had never let me decide what that meant (107).

Shohei does not deny his Japanese roots, but he is troubled by the fact that it is not himself but his parents who decide his cultural identification. Shohei is old enough to decide what he likes and dislikes. While he enjoys watching Godzilla movies, he also enjoys watching Chicago Cubs games. However, his parents do not allow Shohei's self-decision.

Even though transnational adoption experts say that it is important to incorporate children's Asian roots in their everyday life for their healthy cultural identity development, if parents force Asian culture to children, that may be the same structure of forcing white culture to Asian transnational adoptees.

Towards the end of the novel, Shohei finally stands up against the parents' Japanization efforts. He talks to his adoptive parents,

Lots of things are part of me. Japan. America. Chicago. Ireland...sort of. Soccer. My friends. Mathilda. Being adopted. I just want to be the one who gets to choose what the parts are and what they mean (160).

To this, his parents show their understanding to Shohei's true feeling. *Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo* tells us readers that adoptive parents of course need to provide rich cultural experiences to their children, but it is Asian transnational adoptees themselves who have the right to decide their cultural identification.

4. Conclusion

Since most white American adoptive parents have no racialized experiences, they seem to be either take color-blind attitude to their adopted children, which results in whitewashing children, or overemphasizing children's Asian roots. Asian transnational adoptees seem to be upset between the two extreme choices. Yet, *Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo* clearly illustrates that Asian transnational adoptees should choose their cultural identification more than just either white or Asian.

Kristen Hoo-Mi Sloth, a Korean transnational adoptee raised in Norway contends that "no ideal identity formation process exists" (255), but she continues that there are Asian transnational adoptees who "have a relaxed, flexible attitude to ethnicity and cultural belonging. [...They are] open to new influences and stress individual identity more than national identity" (255).

Shohei voices that his cultural identification consists of Japan, America, Ireland, Chicago, friends, soccer, etc. He is developing flexible identity not only bound by ethnic identity. What adoptive parents could do may be to respect children's self-determination for their cultural identification, and provide resources which nurture children's self-esteem. In this way, Asian transnational adoptees may develop healthy and happy cultural identity.

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