

# Birth Country as Totem: Korean Adoptees in Scandinavia and Their Nostalgia<sup>1</sup>?

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## 1.

Eleana Kim, a Korean-American Anthropologist starts her paper on Koreanness of Korean transnational adoptees by such generalizations as follows:

Although some adoptees may have little or no interest in their biological families or country of birth, it is undeniable that, for many, *Korea holds a central place in their imaginations* about who they are, where they came from, and what they might have been otherwise. Many adoptee narratives express a yearning, sometimes laced with fear, to travel to South Korea, to explore cultural and biological “roots”, and perhaps to locate missing pieces of the self [Kim 2007: 115, emphasis mine].

But one must be careful and prudent to conclude regarding the identity of transnational adoptees and their yearning for the birth country (I would regard this yearning as a kind of nostalgia here). Kim’s views might reflect the experiences of senior Korean adoptees living US: in the long historical environment of racism to African Americans, Korean adoptees also frequently have been discriminated once there were outside the private spheres. Situations seem rather different in Scandinavian countries where I have conducted research on transnational adoption past ten years.

Many of adoptees in those countries have, as Kim mentions, interest to visit their birth countries, but do not express a yearning to find their biological mothers and relatives. Sometimes their interest in South Korea (hereafter Korea) may be all the most that of tourists. Let me cite examples.

David (pseudonym) is a Korean adoptee living in Gothenburg, Sweden. He was born in 1989 and adopted in the same year. He has an elder sister and a younger brother: both of them were adopted from Korea though not biologically related. David visited Korea with his family in 2011. He was very surprised to see development of Korea, for his images of Korea was formed through the video his parents took when they adopted in 1989. His family and he

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travelled all around Korea for three weeks, but he felt no urge to visit an orphanage and to search for his biological mother although his adoptive parents had offered help if he had liked to do so for he had a record with her name. He tripped to Korea just as a tourist.

Linda was born in 1966 in Korea and adopted by a Danish couple. She was one of the first Korean adoptees in Denmark. She was invited for a motherland tour for overseas Koreans organized by Holt Adoption Agency in 1989 and stayed three weeks. She visited Korea in 1988 and 1997 as well. She feels she has a close bond with Korea as those surround her are related with Korea through adoption and business. But she had no idea to find her biological mother in her mind while she was in Korea. She loves her Danish parents and is happy with them. She told they gave her self-confidence. She has always felt she is 120% Danish and has had no experience of identity crisis whether she is a Danish or not.

Korean adoptees that had visited Korea found the great difference between them and the native Koreans. In spite of their outlook that is the same as the natives, their manners and speech are those of Westerners. Some adoptees were amused at this experience of difference. It did not cause a mental upheaval, but made them feel they are totally Swedish or Danish.

## 2.

Some grown up Korean adoptees have never been to Korea. Kurt was born in Korea in 1973 and adopted at the age of 16 months by a Swedish couple. He lives in Stockholm and got married a native Swede. He has a younger sister from Ecuador. His sister has the record of the birth mother and she was impelled to trace her roots when her relationship with her partner over ten years came to an end and felt stunned. She visited an Ecuadorian village where her biological mother is said to live but satisfied with getting to the place, she did not dare to meet her birth mother. The image of transnational adoptee by Eleana Kim seems to fit her well.

Kurt is, however, different from his sister. He has no record of his birth at all. He was not a kind of person who has an urge to look for his biological roots. The fact of adoption is not for him necessary and sufficient condition to feel such a psychological impulse. Kurt has been frequented questions if he misses his biological parents or when he would go to Korea to find his birth mother. However, to be born in Korea is just a piece of information, not a lived experience with vivid memories.

Infertility of his wife made them select adoption of a girl from China in 2007. The reason to choose to China was short waiting time and relative low cost, not because of the similarity of appearance between Kurt and his adopted daughter. On this adoption he was again frequented a question why his wife and he did not try to adopt from Korea. It was the same as the question why he didn't go to Korea to find a birth mother. He always has to deal with

such questions. He is fed up and perplexed with. Kurt thinks those surround him always connect him with Korea. Kurt left Korea for Sweden when he was 16 months old without memories of Korea. How such a person could have nostalgia for the country of origin?

### 3.

Signe Howell, a Norwegian social anthropologist and an adoptive mother of a Nepali girl refers to the reactions by an expert of adoption and child welfare to a Norwegian journalist who was a Korean adoptee and who said she accepts her adoption without any mental upheaval. The expert disagreed with her understanding of her own experiences and argued that all adoptees reach a point in life when they want to find about their roots [Howell 2006: 106]. Against the journalist who had no attachment to Korea, he insisted that she probably does feel such an attachment and he concluded that without such anchors “we become rootless” [loc.cit.].

To this expert, psychologist by training, and to those Swedes around Kurt, the country of birth including Korea becomes the totem of adoptees. Claude Lévi-Strauss, a celebrated French structural anthropologist, argued totemism is one of the classification systems, which postulate a homology between natural distinctions and cultural distinctions [L-S 1966: 80]. The social groups of people such as clans are differentiated to each other by the homology of the differences of natural species that become totems of the groups. Totemic species are objects of respect by those group members.

Adoptees are differentiated to each other and from native Swedes by their birth countries. Adoptees from the same country establish an association for promoting communication and fraternity. Families adopting from the same country, especially from China, correspond each other and gather together regularly, for example at a fellow adoptive family’s summer house once a year during the vacation time. Adoptees are expected to nourish the sense of dual identity: they are a member of the country of birth as well as a Swedish citizen. They learn the culture of the birth country in order to be proud of belonging to it. Birth country is always by the side of adoptees.

You may have doubt how nations become totems, as nation is a political, in other words, cultural construct and no longer belongs to nature domains whereas totems in Australian aborigines and in native North Americans are natural species. In addition the relations between men or social groups and natural species are metaphorical (human groups and natural species belong to different domains but the difference between social groups is similar to the difference between species) whereas connections of adoptees with their birth countries are not. They are said to be the part- whole relation or the contiguous relation. In this sense this connection or ties is metonymical. Metonymical is according to Lévi-Strauss an attribute of caste system.

Lévi-Strauss, however, finds analogy between societies with totemism and societies with castes. In India, an exemplar of caste society, “the manufactured objects from which clans take their names receive special respect, like totemic plants and animals” [L-S 1966: 121]. In addition, there is a continuity between totemism and caste. Among the Munda in India, exogamous clans have animal plant totems, but copperbelt, verandah, umbrella are also numbered as totems [ibid.: 120].

According to Philippe Descola and Tim Ingold, the relation between totemic species and humans are of genealogical kind, that is, of ancestors and descendants. They belong to the same class by sharing several attributes [Descola 2013, Ingold 2000]. In other words, this is the relation of contiguity and metonymy.

The relation between transnational adoptees and their birth country can be also regarded as the metonymical one. As I have said, the birth country is not just regarded as the place where an adoptee happened to be born by chance. It is the country that the birth mother is supposed to belong as a citizen. It is regarded as the biological ‘origin’ of an adoptee. Space is equated with (genealogical or biological) time. Adoptee is depicted as if biologically rooted in that place. It is therefore no longer an erratic idea to regard the birth country as totem.

If the birth country is a totem, then what function does this fulfill?

Adoptees are differentiated from native Swedes who are born and grow up in Sweden, and not immigrated into but have ‘roots’ in Sweden. Birth country as totem thus represents a history of “adoptive migration.” It also represents (or is equated with) the biological roots which one naturally yearns for. In other words, it is not natural that adoptees do not have such emotion. Even though many adoptees regard themselves as totally Swedish, it cannot be regarded as possible and as imaginable that they feel nostalgia for Sweden. It is the prerogative of native white Swedes. The birth country as totem reminds those surrounding adoptees of this. Transnational adoptees have different totems so that they are included with the natives into the same category. The birth country totemism is discriminative. It furthermore instills the idea that birth country is the biological root and adoptees indifferent to it are not natural.

#### 4.

It cannot of course be said that this totemism is traditional in the West, for the nation state with the bounded territory is the invention of the modernity as Benedict Andersen and others assert. But could we not say the birth country totemism is predicated on the Western mode of thought?

Lévi-Strauss admits in Ch.8 of *The Savage Mind* that there is a remarkable absence of anything that might have totemism or “totemic bond” in the bounds of the great civilizations

of Europe and Asia. But in the previous chapter of the same book, he also interprets that every individual's personality were almost totem in the West [L-S 1966: 214]. The totemism as a classificatory system also exists in the West though it has not been recognized as such. It has been "humanized". Personality differentiates each individual being from another. It classifies an individual as a *sui generis* into a "mono entity" of a category. Personality has been a totem in the West.

Moreover, some personality traits are shared with by people and in turn become the classifier or the totem and categorize them into the same group. The psychological disposition to visit a birth country for the lost biological mother is such a classifier. It is peculiar for transnational adoptees. The birth country corresponds to this personality. It can be said the outer reification of this inner psychic totem. The fact that each adoptee shows great diversity in their personality and has different personal history after adoption as the background for personality formation is frequently paid little attention to.

But this birth country (psychological disposition) totemism is greatly different from so-called traditional totemism among the Aborigines and native North Americans. The "essential functions of totemic classifications are to break down" the "closing in of the group into itself and promote an idea something like that of a humanity without frontiers" [L-S 1966: 166]. However, the birth country totemism seems obsessed with "the closing in of the group into itself," and treats the limits of their group as the frontiers of ourselves and regard everyone "outside the limits of their society as foreigners." Statistically transnational adoptees are still classified as immigrants in Sweden.

## 5.

If there is no singular adoption case which would be exactly same as others, the emphasis of the longing for biological roots should not be thought of as the natural disposition or desire but invented by psychologists and propagated by adoption experts such as social workers.

Psychiatrical research on transnational adoptees shows that adoptees are more occupied with the thoughts about their biological family in the case that they seem to have a poorer mental health and self esteem [Irhammar 1999: 182].

Maria Irhammar made an analysis that a better mental health status and a more stabilized self identity as a Swedish does not imply a denial of the ethnic origin [Irhammar 1999: 180]. Though she is careful and minute to reach her conclusion, it is easily imaginable that this result makes adoption experts and adoptive parents believe the curiosity about origin is in-built in adoptees. Occupation with biological families by adoptees with poor self esteem may be easily translated as adopted children's high susceptibility due to uprootedness [de Graeve 2010: 368]. Eleana Kim, whom I refer to in the beginning, seems shared with this

presupposition.

It is far from the truth that every Korean adoptee has a strong urge for her birth country and for biological mother. Malin was adopted to a Swedish couple in 1970 when she was 6 months old. She grew up as full Swede and nothing was taught about Korea by her parents. Malin does not have double identity but she has not had serious identity crisis or racial discrimination because of her Asian appearance. She visited Korea in 1990. Although she can speak Japanese for she studied it as a university student, she did not study Korean. She visited Korea as a tourist.

Linda told the fear of being abandoned is always with an adoptee even though she is not always aware of it. The will or ambition to survive can be also found in the mind of an adoptee, which is reified as the ability to read faces of those around, for example.

She found her adoptive son sharing the same disposition with her. She made an analysis by herself that her adoptive son and she had to put behind their “pasts” in order to survive. This analysis (though Linda is not a psychologist) is in the complete opposition to the “backpack” theory by psychological adoption experts, whose implicit message is that the adopted children arrive at an airport of the receiving country with full of past experiences and that “the past, however brief, will have consequences for the child’s development in its circumstances” [Howell 2006: 92].

Both of Linda and her adopted son are from Korea. But she does not say the ambition to survive is deep rooted in Korea or in the fact of adoption.

Linda told that her 7 years old son knows he was born in Korea and came to Denmark just like his mother. But it seems uncertain if he fully grasps the meaning of adoption that Linda was not his birth mother and another mother might be in Korea. Biology does not always necessarily loom large in adoptee’s mind.

## 6.

It is frequently said and therefore becomes cliché that blood ideology or “blood is thicker than water” is obstinate in East Asian societies. However, this does not seem true for native Koreans regarding overseas Korean adoptees. I made interviews with several Koreans in February of 2014. Two of them were middle aged and three were university students. None of them knew that 11<sup>th</sup> May is Day of Adoption since 2005. No one regarded transnational adoptees as Korean but as citizens of receiving countries. They agreed that experiences and relationships with adoptive parents and society are much more constitutive of making up adoptee’s identity than where originally born. They seemed critical of nostalgia for Korea by overseas Korean adoptees.

**Annotation**

- 1 A shorter version of this paper was read at Annual Meeting of Korean Cultural Anthropological Association for 2014, held at Yeungnam University. I should like to thank Dr. Yae Nakamura at Korean University of Foreign Studies who invited me to talk.

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