

Should Our Heritage End with Adoption?

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[adapted from an exclusive writing sample and proposal]

Heritage is often lost through transracial and international adoption. Does Christ invite us to find it?

“For many Asian Americans, our heritage is the cornerstone of our identity.”

A member of the adoptee community shared Reclaim’s call for proposals and I was already stuck in that first sentence.

“Oh?” I thought. “Am I even considered Asian American enough for this series of essays?”

A large part of the cornerstone of my identity resides in the land on which I was born; with my mother; in Korea.

As an adoptee, or *relinquishee*, as others may know the term, my cultural foods, traditions, and stories are largely tied to a small town in Wisconsin, where I was raised by white parents and peers.

“Is that my heritage?” I wondered? Or, is it more connected to the Asian American church who welcomed me in when I began exploring my Korean identity as a young adult?

How would an adoptee reclaim their heritage?

And why was it lost in the first place?

As an international and transracial Korean adoptee, I can relate with some of the complexities of impostor syndrome, not feeling Asian enough, and cultural appropriation (is it possible for an adoptee to appropriate their own birth culture?).

Over the years I’ve also encountered the weight of battling anti-Asian racism and America’s history of erasure in and beyond its local church.

And. What is *heritage* to an international transracial adoptee? Especially when, sometimes, the most significant force holding adoptees back from it is their adoptive parents; and the local church who sponsored their adoption.

Of course, as a mental health professional who serves the adoptee community on a daily basis, I know the answer is much more layered and nuanced than any one of us could provide in one article.

However, the majority of transracial and international adoptees I know agree that adoption shouldn’t force us to relinquish our heritage.

There are multitudes of testimonies from adoptees who’ve sought to regain pieces of their heritage culture lost through adoption - even reconnection with their birth families - only to be met with discouragement, disapproval, and disconnection from their adoptive parent(s).

Some adoptees have actually been threatened with a withdrawal of financial and emotional resources if they “betray” their adopters by reaching out for their families of origin. Not to mention the actual physical escape from enslavement that a fellow transracial international adoptee is currently navigating in New Hampshire (see my official advocacy statement here).

Is there a reason some adoptive parents feel surprised or offended when an adoptee chooses to

recognize and values the parts of their story that exist outside of their adopters?

BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

Adoption isn't the beginning of a family. It's not the end of one either. On the contrary, it's common for caregivers who've felt "called to adopt," to start conceptualizing the adoptee as "theirs" at the expense of what belongs to the adoptee. The child's heritage remains in the sending country because, "You were ours the moment we saw you."

It makes sense, though, how it could be a struggle to support someone else's child, and their heritage, when all you see is your own.

It's especially hard to reclaim a heritage when it appears as if we'd be dividing our household by doing so. Many white adoptive parents have shared that talking about culture, ethnicity, and race is divisive and only makes for awkward tensions between their other family members.

But if we *can't see color*, we won't be bothered with race-related needs; the sorrows and joys that invite the fellowship of believers further into one another's lives and ultimately into a heightened clarity of God's kingdom manifested in the flesh here and now.

It's possible that many adoptive parents simply don't know what to say. They need more coaching. That's reasonable. God's grace is sufficient. And, is it still a thorn? God's kingdom shouldn't be limited to the education and emotions of our adopters alone, should it?

If the adoptive family feels uncomfortable talking about race and culture, why should the child who was procured from another race and culture suffer the loss of their race and culture?

Yes, there are a variety of situations in which "ending" feels appropriate. For example, a situation in which the interaction with birth family causes lasting or permanent physical and/or emotional harm to the child.

In that case there are still ways to allow for the child to make sense of, and negotiate on their own terms, the enduring connection to their parents, even in mind and heart. It could be helpful to see

it as an extension. Or a support. Or a partnership with. A joining.

Would it be inappropriate for adoptees to embark on such a journey?

BORN AGAIN

I speak and train regularly in small and large-group settings, and to adoptive parents in those spaces I ask questions like, "What was it about our birth culture that makes you think assimilation to white middle class America would be a better option for us?"

What makes you think we'd want to exchange our culture, with its image-bearing glory, for white middle class domesticity?

Some say forced assimilation is a relic of the past. But, what name did you give your children when you adopted them into your kingdom?

And from whose kingdom did you adopt?

I was born He-Seong Lee. Then, I became Cameron Lee Small.

[ps: our "Father's business" can be to visit widows and orphans - yes - while we simultaneously strive to keep them in tact with their families]

Is it possible someone is praying for a way to keep and parent her child? And is it possible that we as the local church could be mobilized to facilitate or contribute to the support that would answer her prayers? Rather than her child being the answer to ours? This is part of the mediating narrative that continued to stand as a barrier for many families working hard to parent their children while adoption agency directors work hard to place them for adoption (e.g., consider the current investigations taking place in Korea regarding criminal acts of malfeasance by Holt Children's Services, Korea Social Service, Eastern Social Welfare Society, and Korea Welfare Services).

Of course it's not wrong to desire a family. We're also asking, though, how can we help keep families together? Heritages intact?

How can the local church help raise awareness about the conditions that lead to adoption in the first place, and participate in the turning, the living process of making of all things new?

I had the chance to meet my mom in Korea nearly a decade ago. It was a miracle that she agreed to meet me in person.

She could barely tell me anything about the details of my relinquishment, it was too painful, but she did confess an absence of meaningful support from those around her. After my father died, her lived experience was too much of a burden for her to carry on her own. No one was willing to carry it with her. She felt like a pariah. She was treated like one, too. Is that part of my heritage? The dehumanization of unwed mothers?

DESPISING THE SHAME

Much of my advocacy work is not about shaming individuals and organizations who are doing their best to help.

It's about asking them to help expectant mothers out there do their best to parent; to keep their children. As the first and default ministry. Or, at least included in the both-and tension of "already-and-not-yet."

It's also about asking how we can help adoptees keep their heritage so they don't have to reclaim it later on in life.

The Reclaim proposal continued, "Heritage is inherited. Each generation of Asian Americans receive and pass along their cultural heritage."

Where's my inheritance? I think my parents may have missed that part? Because, I've had to seek it out on my own. Of course my parents love me and I love them. My adoptive parents, too. [And, side note, would readers take any other kind of adoptee testimony seriously?]

For any of us to receive such an inheritance, whiteness first needs to be de-throned as the rule of principle and practice. Not that we don't already come into the world with inherent worth and wonder, but when we attach it to one specific group of people - rather than assume it to be true for all people - through our shared humanity - when we attach it to one group of people it makes

sense how individuals and groups would end up with feelings of entitlement over one another instead of connection with, commitment to, standing for.

Conversely, it makes sense that some of us might feel awful amounts of shame, fear, and depleted self-worth.

When whiteness is the point of reference, it inevitably becomes a pain point.

Part of reclaiming my heritage as a Korean American adoptee was realizing it was worth reclaiming. That it comes with an inherent value and capacity to reflect God's glory.

LEARNING THE LORD THROUGH MY HERITAGE

My journey throughout the past decade of my life has been one of joyful, painstaking, and intentional engagement with Korean and Asian culture, but also feeling a pull to see a kind, active, just, present, and loving God working in, through and beyond our communities and traditions.

3 Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord,
the fruit of the womb a reward.

4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the children of one's youth.

5 Blessed is the man
who fills his quiver with them!

He shall not be put to shame
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

(Psalm 127:3-5)

Yes, and. Already-and-not-yet. I still have space for these questions: What is heritage? What is my heritage? How do I reclaim it? And would it be strong enough to reclaim *me*? What or whose patience and kindness would it take to accomplish such a journey?

I can't fully answer that yet. My understanding alone isn't enough for me to lean on; I'm still working it out. Along with multitudes of fellow adoptees in the community. However, in *this* season, it's been a growing capacity to see our Creator's image in my own, as well as in the places, people, and practices that are represented not just by the words *Asian* or *Asian American*, but in neighbor and sojourner, sibling and child,

stranger and friend, ill and incarcerated, youth and elder; as if we walk with the King himself, as the least of these and as the Person who loves each one of them.

Right now, I wonder if the best heritage is one that works to love its children. Specifically, by acknowledging who and where they're from,

joining their lament and celebrations, and guarding their steps near and far; according to fruitful, blessed, life-giving, justice-hungry, Joy-oriented, in-the-flesh Jesus-touching purposes.

For adoptees, would God be so unable to help us reclaim such promised land?

Cam Lee Small, MS, LPCC is an international adoptee from Korea, an experience that informs and inspires his current professional work as an author and licensed professional clinical counselor. He formed his own private practice, Therapy Redeemed, in 2018, to raise awareness and respond to the mental health needs of adoptees and their families wherever they may be in their adoption journey. Cam's vision for adoptee-centered advocacy is evident through his 1:1 counseling services, live workshops and support groups, Masterclass trainings, and his active content creation/collaboration in and through various media platforms. His work has been featured in Christianity Today, National Council for Adoption, University Minnesota School of Social Work, and Center for Adoption Support and Education. He is currently working on a manuscript for a book to be released through InterVarsity Press to address the intersection of adoption, mental health, and social justice. Cam brings value and much needed perspective to the adoption community, personally and professionally.