

The Gathering of the First Generation of Adult Korean Adoptees:

Adoptees' Perceptions of International Adoption

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INTRODUCTION

[Back to the top](#) "Many of us were from the same orphanages. Many of us came over the same flights. Many of us were adopted into predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon communities, many rural. Many of us considered ourselves white trapped in Asian bodies. Many of us realized the significance of this event, that this was the first meeting of Korean adult adoptees, that we are the first voice...We wanted to share the same experience, meet people who had shared the same experience, not to have to educate people about our experiences, but to listen..."

- Kurt Streyffeler, adoptee

The Gathering of the First Generation of Adult Korean Adoptees was the first of its kind. From September 9-12, 1999, nearly 400 adult Korean adoptees, adopted between the years 1955 and 1985, gathered in Washington, D.C. They represented over thirty states in the United States and several European countries. This first generation of Korean adoptees became part of their adoptive families well before international adoption became the broadly accepted practice it became in the 1990s, and the majority of the participants and their adoptive families did not have the benefit of the many resources currently available. At a time when interest in intercountry adoptions is at a high point, there are questions about how well this group of individuals has fared - questions that can best be answered by the adoptees themselves.

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, in conjunction with Holt International Children's Services, undertook a survey of the participants in *The Gathering* to gain greater insight into the experiences of Korean adoptees since they began arriving in the U.S. and Europe in 1955 and to utilize these insights in the planning of *The Gathering* itself. The three day event further enriched the understanding of Korean adoptees' experiences as they shared all that had happened in their lives, clarified the lessons learned, and lent advice to the field of international adoption.

This report contains an historical overview of the international adoption of Korean children; the results of the survey that was conducted prior to *The Gathering*; a synopsis of the discussions in which adoptees participated at *The Gathering*; a synthesis of the observations of the

professional facilitators who worked with each of the adoptee discussion groups; and a discussion of the implications for international adoption policy and practice. The experiences and insights of adult Korean adoptees can provide important guidance to the field of international adoption - both in understanding the impact of past practice on adoptees and shaping international adoption practice for the future.

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute gratefully acknowledges the expertise provided by Dr. Mary Ann Jones and Michael Botsko in the analysis of the survey data.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION OF KOREAN CHILDREN

[Back to the top](#) The concept of adoption was virtually nonexistent in South Korea prior to the 1950s. Adoption began to be recognized in South Korea in connection with the Korean War, but this process occurred initially with little planning. Ultimately, however, adoption evolved into an important component of South Korean social policy for orphaned and abandoned children over the course of more than forty years [Sarri, et al. 1998].

The adoption of children internationally by U.S. and European families began just after World War II in response to the number of children orphaned as a result of the civil war in Greece and the aftermath of the world war in Germany [Carp 1998]. The second and largest wave of international adoption was of South Korean children as a result of the Korean War. This group of children - representing the first generation of Korean children adopted by U.S. and European families - were of mixed race, having Korean birth mothers and military fathers from different countries. International adoption became an important service for the growing number of children in South Korean institutions who were not accepted in Korean society because of illegitimacy and/or their non-Korean status. Later, the international adoption of Korean children continued because of a range of factors: a growing demand for the adoption of healthy newborns; South Korea's ongoing relationship with charitable organizations that opened orphanages in the country; Korea's unstable economic situation; the limited interest in adopting among couples in Korea; the perception that international Korean adoptions were successful; and internal challenges within South Korea related to establishing domestic child welfare policy in response to the large number of abandoned and orphaned children [Sarri, et al. 1998]. Social attitudes in

South Korea also contributed to the continuation of intercountry adoptions: nominal government support for single mothers; the trend toward family size reduction from the 1960s through the one-child policy of 1986; a pervasive stigma regarding adoption; and an ongoing belief that abandoning a child could provide the child with the benefit of an opportunity for a better future [Sarri, et al. 1998].

Korean adoptions began officially in 1954 with a presidential order establishing Children Placement Services (presently Social Welfare Society). It is estimated that more than 98,000 Koreans were adopted by U.S. families between 1955 and 1998 [U.S. Department of State 1999; S. Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare 1999; Holt Korea 1999]. An estimated 141,000 Korean children were adopted worldwide during that time period [Holt Korea 1999; S. Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare 1999]. The South Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare [1999] reports that 42% of these adoptees were male and 58% female.

In 1955, South Korea began to establish private adoption agencies to process intercountry adoptions, including the Holt Adoption Agency. In 1961, the Orphan Adoption Special Law was enacted to protect orphaned and dependent children adopted by families from abroad [Sarri, et al. 1998]. The law continued to evolve, and by 1966, only licensed agencies could conduct intercountry adoptions. The number of international adoptions continued to grow so that by 1970, more than 9,500 Korean children had been adopted internationally. Ninety percent of these children were mixed-race or orphans [also-known-as, inc. 1999; Holt Korea 1999].

In the 1970s, with the Korean War in the distant past, South Korea began to experience an upsurge of economic growth and industrialization. Societal values and lifestyles changed, with increased rates of divorce and separation and a rise in teenage pregnancy. The stigma associated with out-of-wedlock birth remained. During the 1970s, only half of the children placed for adoption were orphans, with most of the remaining children born out of wedlock [Holt Korea 1999]. Because of societal values emphasizing the importance of bloodline, children were adopted domestically only by extended family or blood relatives [Sarri, et al. 1998]. By 1976, international adoptions of Korean children had reached an all time high of 6,597 children, with approximately 4,000 of these children adopted by families in the U.S. [also-known-as, inc. 1999]. That same year, in response to North Korean criticism of South Korea's new "export," South Korea enacted the Five Year Plan for Adoption and Foster Care (1976-1981) to limit the number of children adopted overseas while encouraging domestic adoptions [Sarri, et al. 1998]. Intercountry adoptions, however, continued at relatively high levels. The challenge remained to encourage more South Korean parents to adopt Korean

children who were otherwise being adopted by families in the United States or Europe.

In 1981, as neighboring countries continued to criticize South Korea's level of international adoption, the government altered its approach to intercountry adoption to one of a "good-will ambassador" policy [Sarri 1998]. International adoption agencies were encouraged to hire Korean social workers as part of their staff to help adopted Korean children adjust to their new homes in other countries. With support staff to ensure the welfare of the children, this emigration plan expanded the number of Korean children being adopted internationally to a new high of 8,837 children in 1985 [S. Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare 1999].

During the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, South Korea faced increased international criticism about its adoption policies. Major policy changes with regard to helping children and families, however, were well under way by then, including a plan to steadily decrease on an annual basis the number of children adopted internationally. By 1989, the South Korean government enacted a policy to begin the termination of international adoption, with the goal of limiting overseas adoption by 1995 to only mixed-race children and children with disabilities [Sarri 1998]. This goal, however, was not achieved.

In 1996, the South Korean Ministry released "The Special Law on the Adoption Promotion and Procedure," which emphasized its promotion of domestic adoption but which did not address the earlier goal of significantly limiting intercountry adoption [Holt Korea 1999; Sarri 1998]. Still, the number of Korean children adopted internationally since 1986 has continuously decreased, with the total adoptions by U.S. families at fewer than 2000 children annually. Additionally, for the last six years, China and Russia have ranked above South Korea in the number of children adopted internationally from each of those countries. Only recently, with the current economic crisis in Asia, has South Korea allowed the number of children placed internationally for adoption to increase slightly [U.S. Department of State 1999].

The Western concept of "open adoption" with identifying information shared between birth and adoptive families, is still generally unaccepted in South Korea. Children placed internationally for adoption typically have single mothers, either widows or unwed women. The stigma associated with single motherhood remains strong and the majority of the children placed in overseas adoptions have been children of unmarried women (75% of children in 1986) [Holt Korea 1999]. None of the reports released from South Korea suggests that any child available for adoption was part of an intact family at the time the parent agreed to place her child for

adoption. The concept of open adoption conflicts with Korean societal and cultural values that would subject women to harsh criticism if their adoption plans were to be revealed. As a consequence, significant challenges to developing and maintaining open communication between Korean birth mothers and adoptive families remain.

The South Korean government has worked diligently to establish connections with Korean children who were adopted internationally. Resources have been made available to Korean adoptees and their adoptive families to assist them in establishing closer ties to Korea. Although the South Korean government is committed to limiting the need to place Korean children with adoptive families abroad, the reality is that intercountry adoption of Korean children will continue at some level, as will international adoptions of children from other Asian, European and Latin American countries. The experiences of these children are likely to be similar to those of Korean adoptees and the lessons that can be learned from Korean adoptees - the largest contingency of international adoptees - can provide critical guidance to the field of international adoption. The experiences of Korean adoptees, as revealed in the survey and discussions at The Gathering - all reported from the perspective of adulthood - provide information which will allow the field to examine international adoption in relation to race, culture, ethnicity, identity, and family; shape services and support for the growing number of children adopted from other countries; and develop stronger preparation and post-adoption programs for their multi-ethnic families.

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THE RESULTS OF THE SURVEY OF THE FIRST GENERATION ADULT KOREAN ADOPTEES

[Back to the top](#) Prior to The Gathering, participants were invited to complete a survey about their life experiences. Questions were specific to childhood experiences, relationships with family, friends, peers, and the community; identity; discrimination; sense of connectedness to Korea; and feeling about and experiences with searching for birth family.

METHODOLOGICAL STATEMENT

[Back to the top](#) Survey questionnaires were distributed to all persons registering for The Gathering. Invitations to the Gathering were sent to 1800 adults who were adopted from South Korea through Holt International Services. Announcements of the Gathering also were sent to the 26 agencies in the U.S. that had placed children from Korea since 1955 and to approximately 500 adoptive parent groups across the U.S. Notices of the Gathering also appeared in newsletters and publications serving international adoptions agencies in the United States, Europe, and Australia; families who have adopted internationally; young adults who were adopted internationally; and the Korean community in the United States. Notices were posted on the web sites of Holt International Services, The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, and also-known-as, inc., and the survey form could be downloaded from those sites.

As individuals registered for the Gathering, a survey with a stamped, self-addressed envelope was mailed to them. Registrants who had not completed the survey were contacted and urged to return the questionnaire. By July 31, 1999, responses had been received from 163 of the 350 persons registered for the conference as of that date, for a

response rate of 47%. In addition, 4 persons who did not register for the conference submitted a questionnaire and were included in the final sample, bringing the total to 167 respondents.

FINDINGS IN DETAIL

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Demographic Profile	
82%	Female
18%	Male
96%	Residing in U.S.A.
4%	Residing in Europe
31 Years - Mean Age	
47%	Never Married
44%	Married
9%	Divorced
30%	Had Children
70%	Had No Children
Highest Level of Education	
7%	High School Diploma
22%	Some College
42%	College Degree
3%	Some Graduate Work
24%	Graduate Degree
15%	Currently Studying at the Undergraduate or Graduate Level

Demographic Profile

The respondents were predominately female (82%) and currently residing in the United

States (96%). Respondents ranged in age from 21 to 47 years. The mean age was 31. Almost half had never been married (47%), slightly more than two-fifths were married (44%), and 9% were divorced. The respondents were a highly educated group: 70% were college graduates; 24% held graduate degrees; and 15% were still students. Occupationally, they reflected a range of work interests, including management or administration (30%), human services (21%), technology/science (10%), and performance/art (9%). More than half of the respondents (58%) indicated that they had a spouse or significant other. Male respondents were more likely to have a spouse or significant other from the Korean or Asian community. Male respondents' spouses or significant others were as likely to be Caucasian (50%) as Asian (50%). By contrast, eighty percent of female respondents had a spouse or significant other who was Caucasian; only small percentages of females' spouses or significant others were Asian (13%), African American (3%), or Latino (3%). None of the spouses

or significant others was adopted. Thirty percent of the respondents had children.

Adoptive Placement

Age at Time of Adoption			
Age	# of Respondents	Age	# of Respondents
0	36	7	3
1	46	8	3
2	22	10	3
3	16	11	1
4	12	13	1
5	11	14	1
6	11		

Respondents were adopted during the time period 1956-1985. Their ages at time of adoption ranged from less than a year to 14 years of age. The median age at time of adoption was 2 years old, meaning that one-half of all respondents were 2 years of age or younger at time of adoption. Girls were younger at time of adoption (76% adopted at age 3 or younger) than were boys (53% adopted at age three or younger). The number of respondents adopted after the age of 6 dropped off sharply.

Residence at Time of Adoption		
	Adopted at Age 3 or Younger	Adopted When Older than Age 3

Orphanage	51%	91%
Foster Family	45%	4%
Birth Family	4%	4%

As a group, three fifths (62%) of the respondents lived in an orphanage at the time of adoption; a full third (33%) lived with foster families; and a small percentage (4%) lived with their birth families. Respondents adopted at an older age (over the age of 3) were far more likely to have lived in an orphanage at the time of adoption (91%) than respondents adopted at age 3 or younger (51%). Respondents adopted at age 3 or younger were much more likely to have lived with a foster family (45%) than were respondents adopted after the age of 3 (4%). Although not statistically significant, it is of note that male respondents (80%) were more likely than female respondents (59%) to have lived in an orphanage at the time of adoption, and males (17%) were less likely than females (37%) to have lived with foster families at the time of adoption.

Consistent with their current residences, most respondents were adopted by American families (95%) - 90% by Americans residing in the U.S. at the time of adoption and 5% by Americans living in other locations, primarily Asia - and the remaining respondents were adopted by European families (5%). The majority of respondents grew up in small towns or rural areas (71%) and were raised by Caucasian mothers (98%) and fathers (97%).

<u>Siblings</u>	
13%	Respondent Was the Only Child
26%	Biological Children of Adoptive Parents
52%	Other Adopted Korean Sibling(s)
7%	Domestically Adopted Sibling(s)
3%	Internationally Adopted Sibling(s) (Not Korean)

Slightly more than half of the respondents (52%) had at least one sibling who was also adopted from South Korea. Most respondents (70%) grew up in Caucasian neighborhoods, although some respondents lived in neighborhoods that included Koreans and/or other Asians (15%) or individuals of other (non-Asian) ethnic backgrounds (13%). While growing up, the majority of respondents had only Caucasian friends (55%), but a number of respondents reported having friends who were Korean or Asian (24%) or of other (non-Asian) ethnic backgrounds (19%).

Ethnic Identity

A number of respondents identified sources of comfort in helping them to shape their identity as they were growing up. One-third named their parents as a source of comfort while another one-third named their families more broadly as playing an important role in this regard. Other important sources of comfort that respondents named were friends (26%); religious,

spiritual or church resources (13%); other siblings from South Korea (8%); involvement in such activities as dance, music and Tae Kwon Do (7%); and living in an open-minded and/or supportive community (6%). Some respondents offered very specific sources of comfort: "my intelligence and good looks," "strong, self-assured and socially-conscious women, particularly women of color," and "having older adult friends as support." One respondent reported that she was "still shaping" her identity and another revealed "I'm still a work in progress . . ."

Respondents provided a range of information about how they viewed themselves ethnically when they were growing up. Of those who described themselves in ethnic terms as children and adolescents, more than one-third (36%) considered themselves Caucasian; over one-quarter (28%) considered themselves Korean-American or Korean-European; just under one-quarter considered themselves American or European (22%); and fourteen percent viewed themselves as Asian or Korean.

A number of respondents provided comments in response to the question, "How did you think of yourself ethnically as you were growing up?" Some adoptees expressed difficulty in having a clear sense of ethnicity when they were growing up: "I always felt slightly like a 'fraud' since I was not really a Korean, nor did I feel I was accepted as an 'American' like Caucasians. It is real hard to feel 'American' when strangers constantly asked me 'Where are you from?' and 'How long have you been here?'" Other adoptees struggled with being Korean or Asian versus being "white," describing themselves as they were growing up as "Amerasian trying to be 'white,'" "Not 'white' enough;" and "Caucasian, except when looking in the mirror [when] I was reminded that I was Korean." Others stated that as they were growing up, they saw themselves as Caucasian or white. These adoptees described themselves as "Caucasian who happened to look different;" "Caucasian with a difference;" "a white person in an Asian body;" and "white middle class, but adopted from Korea." Other adoptees said that as they were growing up, they

identified with their adoptive family's or adoptive country's heritage or culture, considering themselves to be "Irish, Italian, German and Korean;" "Scandinavian;" "Caucasian Italian American;" and "as [part of an] English, German, Jewish, White family."

VIEWS OF OWN ETHNICITY		
Ethnic View of Self	While growing up	As Adults
Asian/Korean	14%	14%
American/ European	22%	10%
Korean-American/ European	28%	64%
Caucasian	36%	11%

Some adoptees discussed their identity as they were growing up in terms of feeling different: "I felt different and alienated and alone;" "I felt like I didn't belong;" "[I was] a person who didn't fit in;" "I was embarrassed and understood very little about myself. I wanted to be with people like myself;" "A freak - I tried not to think about it." In marked contrast, other adoptees responded to the question with comments that indicated no sense of being different or no real focus on the issue of ethnicity as they were growing up: "[I was] just like everyone else;" "I considered myself the same as my friends;" "I didn't think about it;" "I never really thought much about it;" "I was who [I] was." When describing themselves in ethnic terms as adults, respondents were far more likely to consider themselves Korean-American or Korean-European (64%) and less likely to describe themselves as Caucasian (11%) or American or European (10%) than they did when growing up. The more striking changes in respondents' views of their own ethnicity between the time they were "growing up"

and adulthood occurred among male respondents. Whereas 45% of the male respondents who described themselves in ethnic terms considered themselves "Caucasian" while growing up, no males considered themselves Caucasian as adults. Compared to 15% of the male respondents who considered themselves Korean-American or Korean-European while growing up, 57% reported that as adults, they thought of themselves as Korean-American or Korean-European. Similar trends occurred among female respondents but were not as dramatic.

Identification with Korean or Asian heritage was greater among those who were more highly educated. With each higher educational level (high school, some college, college degree, graduate work and graduate degree), the level of identification with Korean or Asian heritage increased. In addition, nine of the variables that bear on the adoptees' current perception of themselves as Korean or Asian (such as exploring Korean heritage and knowing one's Korean name) were grouped to form a scale to measure the degree of respondents' Korean or Asian identity. The scale was used to determine which factors were associated with respondents' level of Korean/Asian identity. Most strongly associated was age at the time of adoption, with those respondents adopted at an older age having a stronger sense of Korean/Asian identity. Other factors (such as gender and year of adoption) were not associated with Korean identity.

VIEWS OF ETHNICITY BY GENDER				
Ethnic View of Self	Males		Females	
	While growing up (n=29)	As Adults (n=28)	While growing up (n=132)	As Adults (n=128)
Asian/Korean	10%	19%	15%	13%
American/European	30%	23%	20%	7%

Korean-American/ European	15%	57%	30%	66%
Caucasian	45%	0	34%	14%

Exploration of Korean Heritage

Respondents also reported differences in the extent to which they explored their Korean heritage during childhood and adolescence and as adults. Over half of the respondents (90) indicated that they had taken advantage of opportunities to explore their Korean heritage while they were growing up. Female respondents (57%) were more likely to report having explored their Korean heritage while growing up than were male respondents (40%), as were respondents adopted at a younger age (3 years or younger) - 60% versus 38% of those who were over the age of 3 at the time of adoption.

The comments from respondents who described the opportunities they used to explore their Korean heritage revealed a wide range of attitudes - some adoptees used existing resources grudgingly ["I attended one Korean culture 2-day long camp - left after the first day;" "My parents enrolled me in Korean culture camps - I stopped going when I was in 3rd or 4th grade"], while others happily took advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves ["My first camp was Camp ____, where my whole family went and we all learned about Korea and its culture together"]. Activities used to explore Korean heritage included Korean and/or adoptee organizations and Korean churches (72%); reading books about Korean history and culture and/or adoption (22%); contact with Korean friends or members of the Korean community (12%); eating Korean food at home or in restaurants (12%); and traveling to Korea as a child or teenager (9%).

Comments from adoptees who did not explore their Korean heritage while growing up included: "I refused because I was trying to fit in;" "My parents never discouraged me, but never really encouraged me either;" and "Through my teen years, I was not interested in pursuing my heritage . . . there are so many variables to being a teen that my ethnicity was not an issue."

Activities Used for Exploring Korean Heritage		
Activity	Growing Up	As Adults
Korean and/or Adoptee Organizations/ Events	72%	46%
Books/Study	22%	40%
Korean Friends or Contacts	12%	34%
Korean Food	12%	4%
Travel to Korea	9%	38%
Korean Language Study	5%	19%

A larger number of respondents - 117 (74% of all respondents) - reported exploring their Korean heritage as adults. Respondents who described the opportunities they used to explore their Korean heritage as adults specified: involvement with Korean organizations (46%); studying or reading about Korean history and culture (40%); traveling to Korea (38%); active involvement with Korean friends or the Korean community (34%); and studying the Korean language (19%).

Experiences with Discrimination

The majority of respondents reported that they had experienced some form of discrimination while they were growing up. Race (70%) was cited more often as the basis for discrimination than was adoption (28%). A number of adoptees provided comments in response to the question, "If you felt any type of discrimination as you were growing up, are there any thoughts you would like to share about that experience?" The comments reflected a range of experiences. A few adoptees stated that they did not experience discrimination ["I feel like an oddball who grew up without experiencing any discrimination"]. Others recounted experiences with discrimination that they described as mild ["I didn't feel injured or threatened because it was infrequent or fairly mild;" "The only thing that bothered me was that a lot of people asked me if [or assumed] I was Chinese or Japanese;" "The discrimination was mainly the minor kinds of teasing that many children experience because of their peculiarities. Mine happened to be because I was Asian"]; as persistent ["It wasn't blatant -- just the everyday little things (ridicule, stares, comments, assumptions) which accumulated over a lifetime simply wore you down;" "Very sad memories of the constant teasing of my ethnicity, more frequent in elementary school but more intense in high school"]; or as severe ["It was very humiliating, degrading and painful"]. Some adoptees highlighted certain factors as most central to the discrimination they felt:

- Adoption: "I grew up in a small, predominantly Caucasian middle-class town where adoption seemed, to me, to be unacceptable because it was "un-natural" -- children, more so than adults, were more unaccepting and, at times, cruel;"
- Race: "Unfortunately, my parents were not particularly open-minded in the area of race despite having adopted two non-white children. They made racist comments to us about Koreans as well as other non-whites;" "The racism I experienced was enhanced because I felt like the

people I most closely associated with . . . turned on me;"

- Stereotyping: "I had to be smart because I am Asian;" "Any discrimination I felt was because I was Korean and overweight. I didn't fit the 'tiny' Asian role;" "People tend to think you are really intelligent and a stereotypical nerd. I was discriminated against by Asians because I didn't speak my native tongue and discriminated against by Caucasians because of how I looked;"
- Gender: "Any discrimination I experienced was related to being female, not race or adoption;"
- A combination of gender and race: "It was mostly internalized attitudes towards gender and race combined that helped to foster [in me] an internal conflict between an assertive intellectual and a passive, shy Asian girl;" and
- Physical appearance: "The pointing out of physical differences made me think I was ugly;" "Being called 'greasy haired' and 'chink' was hurtful;" "Because I am Amerasian, I was not Korean enough and not Caucasian enough;" "Growing up in a small white community, I was a 'novelty' but very few people associated with me;" "I wanted to be like [everyone else]. Instead, I was always catching attention [both positive and negative] for being different."

Adoptees described different responses to discrimination. Some stated that experiences with discrimination did not significantly affect them because of inner strength or that these experiences made them stronger:

- "Those rare times [in which I experienced discrimination] did not affect my esteem or confidence because by that time I already had much pride in my heritage and a strong foundation of worth. My parents told me, instilled in me, to empathize with these children

because they must have felt badly about themselves in order to have antagonized others."

- "I learned early on not to obsess over things that I could not change. I couldn't necessarily change how others saw me, but I could change how I saw others and myself."
- "I feel the discrimination I endured when I was younger made me stronger. It made me see me for who I was and not how people viewed me. I learned to see myself as special."
- "I think it made me stronger and more secure in my identity."

Other adoptees reported a negative impact from their experiences with discrimination:

- "[It] taught me to deny my Korean part."
- "The teasing and discrimination by other children made me deny and hate my Korean heritage."
- "The experiences of being picked on and singled out due to my Korean heritage made me want to hide my differences in order to 'fit in.'"
- "The persecution affected my personality -- [I became] introverted, unhappy, and hostile."
- "When I was younger, I tended to head off discrimination at the pass by poking fun at myself. Therefore, many of my friends felt it was okay to call me names such as 'squint eyes' or 'chink face' because I allowed it, even laughed about it."

Similarly, with regard to dating, adoptees' comments reflected variations in their experiences with discrimination. Some adoptees felt less attractive as a result of being Korean ["I felt that I wasn't pretty because I didn't meet the Western ideal of beauty;" "I

did not consider myself attractive because I was not Caucasian"] -- affecting both the extent to which they dated and the extent to which they were accepted by their dates' families. Several women shared their struggles with dating because of Asian female stereotypes of the "passive female" or the "exotic delicate curiosity" that men perceived them to be. Other women commented that they were stereotyped as "too smart" or "nerdy" to be considered attractive. Other adoptees, however, reported that they had greater confidence in dating because they were "different": "I had an edge because I was different from all the other kids (who were white);" others "were intrigued by the fact that I was adopted from another country but familiar with their culture;" "I always believed I was special because I was adopted."

Social Relationships

Respondents provided information regarding their choices of individuals to date; their choices of friends; and their choices of neighbors. Their responses reflected small but discernible changes in ethnic dating preferences over time. Fifteen percent of respondents reported that their dating patterns changed between high school and college and that they dated more Asians in college - changes which may reflect changing preferences or greater opportunities to meet and date other Asians. A larger percentage of male respondents (23%) than female respondents (14%) reported a change in favor of dating more Asians in college. A similar pattern emerged after college: a larger percentage of males (17%) than females (5%) reported dating more Asians during this period of their lives. The vast majority of respondents (96%) did not express a preference for dating other adoptees. Male respondents (13%), however, were more likely to express such a preference than were female respondents (2%).

With regard to respondents' current patterns of social relationships, a little more than half (57%) included Asians among their circle of friends, although close to one-quarter (24%) had Caucasian friends only and one respondent reported having Asian friends only. Equivalent percentages of respondents reported that

their neighbors were Caucasian only (39%) or were of diverse backgrounds, including Asian (37%). Smaller percentages described their neighbors as diverse but not including Asians (17%) or too diverse to characterize (8%).

Connections with Korean Culture

One quarter of respondents (25%) reported some knowledge of the Korean language and one respondent was fluent in Korean. Almost three-quarter of respondents (72%), however, had no knowledge of the Korean language. The vast majority of respondents (95%) knew their Korean names. Of these respondents, one-fifth (31 respondents) reported that they knew the meaning of their Korean names and 9% (15 respondents) had some idea of the meaning of the name but were not certain of the exact meaning and/or if the meaning attributed to the name was accurate. More than a quarter (28%) reported that they used their Korean name, or some portion of it, in at least some situations.

More than half of the respondents (57%) have visited Korea. Respondents adopted after the age of 3 (69%) were more likely to have visited Korea than were respondents adopted at age 3 or younger (52%). Of those respondents who have visited Korea, 45% did so as part of an agency-sponsored trip. Close to half of the respondents (73 respondents) provided descriptions of their experiences when they visited Korea. Of these adoptees, 44% reported the experience to be very positive, with comments such as "[I was] treated like a guest of honor . . . people were warm, gracious, and hospitable;" "It was a lot of fun;" "I found the Koreans to be very kind and inquisitive;" "I was treated with warmth and hospitality." A little less than a quarter (22%) of the adoptees described a negative experience in Korea, sharing such comments as "I was basically ignored and not given any thought as to my worth;" "Silent reverse discrimination -- pity and ambivalence;" "I felt that I was looked down upon because I didn't speak Korean." About one-fifth of the adoptees reported somewhat mixed experiences, with the more negative aspects of the experience generally related to the issue of their not speaking the Korean language -- "I found it

interesting that Korean people were very friendly to me until I told them "I'm sorry I don't speak Korean" and then they . . . were rude" -- or to the issue of their adoption -- "The Koreans were very hospitable and generous but the attitudes towards adoption are offensive to me. When I was in Korea, we were told that now we owe Korea because it is our 'motherland.'"

Search and Reunion

Search for Birth Family

22% Have searched or are in the process of searching

34% Interested in searching

15% Uncertain whether interested in searching

29% Not interested in searching

Respondents were somewhat divided in relation to their interest in searching for their birth families. Slightly less than a quarter had undertaken a search or were in the process of searching. One-third stated that they were interested in searching but had not yet taken any step in that direction. The smallest group - 15% - were uncertain about their interest in searching. And close to one-third stated that they had no interest in searching.

Almost half of the respondents (77 respondents) described why they had an interest in searching for their birth families. The major reasons given for their desire to search were: to obtain medical histories (40%); curiosity (30%); to meet others whom they physically resemble (18%); to learn why they were placed for adoption (18%); to learn whether they have relatives, particularly siblings (16%); to fill a void or gain a sense of closure (16%); and to relay a message to their birth parents (10%). In those cases in which adoptees stated that they wished to give a message to their birth parents, the messages they wished to convey were that they were

well and happy or grateful to their birth parents for the decision they made ["I would like to thank my mother;" "I have a rich and full life;" "I am happy and not to worry."]. Four adoptees explained why they had no interest in searching: "There isn't a need for me;" "I mostly live in the present and the future;" "I'm thankful that my birth parents gave life to me but I have no interest in meeting them;" and "I know that I was abandoned . . . always felt that my [birth] family cared enough for me to place me where someone could find me."

Fourteen respondents stated that they had obtained information about their birth families and 11 respondents reported that they had had contact with their birth families. Of this latter group, 2 respondents had always had contact with their birth families and 3 were found as a result of search efforts by a birth family member. In all 3 cases in which the birth family initiated the search, the adoptee was older (over age 3) at the time of adoption. The 6 respondents who had established contact with their birth families as a result of conducting their own searches reported the use of a number of resources, including the records at the Reception Center; City Hall records; the Holt agency in Korea; and advertisements in Korean publications.

The outcomes of the reunions varied. In some cases, contact had been limited to letters and phone calls; in other cases, there had been one or more personal contacts. Two adoptees reported close relationships: "I discovered that I have been loved and missed all those years . . . I plan to submit applications for permanent visas for my brothers and their wives . . . we've talked of living our retirement years together" and "[The] relationship has evolved over the last twenty-two years. Almost a normal relationship that any family may have." Two adoptees reported that it was very hard to sustain a relationship because of language barriers.

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SUMMARY OF THE ADOPTees' DISCUSSIONS IN SMALL GROUPS

Participants' responses to the survey, as just reviewed, served as a foundation for further discussion at The Gathering. Much of the discussion took place in small groups in which participants joined together based on the years of their births to share their experiences and discuss many of the issues raised in the survey. These groups were organized as follows:

- Group I - birth years 1952-1959
- Group II - birth years 1960-1966
- Group III - birth years 1967-1970
- Group IV - birth years 1971-1972
- Group V - birth years 1973-1974
- Group VI - birth years 1975-1978
- Group VII - spouses and partners

The average size of each group was 50 people. Each group was led by a facilitator with extensive experience in international adoption practice. Each group also had an assigned notetaker, and an adoptee was designated to report back to the entire group the following day. The following summarizes adoptees' discussions on nine key topics: reasons participants came to The Gathering; memories of Korea and arrival in their new home; impact of early experiences on adoptees' lives; discrimination; identity; dating and relationships; relationship to Korea; search and reunion; and perceptions of adoption. Also summarized are the discussion of spouses and partners, which covered most of these topics as well, and the observations of the group facilitators about the content of the adoptees' discussions.

Why Did Participants Come to The Gathering?

When asked why they chose to come to *The Gathering*, participants overwhelmingly responded that curiosity was the principal motivation. Many came to learn more about what other Korean adoptees were like, to meet other adoptees with similar life experiences, and to see how adoption played out in others' lives. For some, *The Gathering* was a first step toward finding what part of Korea remained in them, "to connect with who I am." For others, there was a desire to have a sense of belonging - to be with others like themselves, "to break free from isolation," "to fill a void," or to talk about things they could not discuss with their families. Many realized that *The Gathering* was not a typical conference in that the adoptees were the participants and the presenters and that adoptees were sharing their expertise with each other. For these adoptees, it was a time to gain understanding about themselves as Korean-Americans/Europeans and as adoptees. Others came in search of an identity. There were some who came with a more specific agenda - "to have a voice for the adoptee

community," to raise awareness about adoption, "to generate a subculture," and "to not be the only one to educate." Many took pride in sharing their own experiences and understood they could assert themselves rather than have their interests represented by adoptive parents, social workers and other adoption professionals.

Groups I and II were distinct in that many chose to come to *The Gathering* for their children as well as for themselves. As their children started to explore those aspects of themselves that were Asian, many of the participants in these groups felt a growing desire to learn about their Korean culture. They expressed the desire to share with their children the discovery of the Korean aspect of their own identity, which for many had been ignored most of their lives.

Early History: Memories of Korea and their Arrivals in their New Homes

Memories or the search for memories was a theme in all the groups, yet for each person with extensive recall, there was an individual who could not recall anything. For members of Groups I to IV - most of whom were adopted over the age of two - the memories of Korea were as powerful and, in some cases, as fresh as if the events had happened only the day before. There were participants who knew every detail of their "story:" their lives prior to adoption, how they came to be adopted, and their lives in orphanages. For others, memories were not so vivid, and, instead, there were "essences" - smells, feelings, and tastes that were unidentifiable. Some members of Group I held memories of military life and the Korean War - memories that included "tall white men in uniform," "living on an army base while your Army Dad tried to figure out how to bring you home," "hitting hats out of a top bunk with a fly swatter," and "getting lots of candy." There were others, though, who principally remembered poverty - "memories of oatmeal, lots of oatmeal...with flies in it." One person described memories of Korea "like a film in fast forward, (you) see traces, and every once in a while the film stops - a very clear, sharp memory but no way to identify the people and nothing to put a name to, and it is only one frame." Another person remembered an orientation class prior to coming to the U.S. and specifically recalled being told not to walk on the grass, but then arriving in the U.S., seeing grass all over, and not knowing what to do.

Others shared that leaving Korea was their first memory of loss - loss of relationships to which they could not put a name, and vague images of parents, siblings, hands being held, and looking out of windows, knowing that they would never again see a familiar face. Participants in Groups V and VI arrived in their adoptive homes at a much younger age, many as infants. As a result, they did not have memories of Korea, reporting that

"life began at New York airport," and "life started at adoption." Some members of Groups IV, V, and VI referred to their memories as if they were "sleepwalking," with memories constructed from what friends and family members told them about their early years. Many made clear, however, that their sense of loss was no less profound, perhaps because of the very absence of memories.

Discussions of adoptees' arrival and adjustment to their new homes elicited both humor and pain. Memories of Korea colored many of the participants' memories of their first day in their new homes. Some participants recalled struggling to use silverware like chopsticks, and others recalled feelings of fear - of being sent back, of the dark, of sleeping alone, of men, and of loss. One participant, who came to his adoptive family at 3 years of age, summed up the transition from Korea to the U.S. with a word association, "crying, wet, ate kimchee, Burger King, bathtub." Adoptees who came to their adoptive families at older ages remembered feeling terrified. As adults, some of them stated that they continued to attempt to make sense of what could have happened had they not been adopted.

How did Early Experiences Impact Adoptees' Lives?

Discussions of early life experiences focused on participants' relationships with parents, siblings, and school. Group I participants had unique experiences because they were biracial or mixed race. The experiences of their parents were also unique - "not only as parents, but as adoptive parents, and not only as adoptive parents, but as adoptive parents of international Korean adoptees." The participants in Group I recognized that they grew up in a time when parents were advised not to highlight the differences between themselves and their children and instead to help their children become "full" Americans or Europeans. One adoptee felt his parents followed this advice so completely that, "I was one of them - poster child for assimilation." This approach provided many with a sense of belonging, but others experienced isolation and shame because they knew that both they and their families were "different." For some, there was the feeling of being "white but in the wrong package." Many Group I participants stated that they had no interest in Korea until they had children and realized that they had cause to celebrate and share their Korean culture.

Participants who were born and adopted in the late 1970s reported that they had opportunities early in their lives to explore their Korean heritage and their families encouraged them to talk about being adopted. Many of the adoptees, however, felt either ambivalent about this accessibility to Korean culture or felt that the pendulum had swung too far to the other

extreme. Some of these participants expressed the feeling that their parents had focused too much on adoption issues, and, looking back, believed that much of what they had experienced was simply part of normal development.

The desire to be "normal" and "ordinary" was a pervasive theme. One adoptee, for example, shared that when she was young, she didn't tell people she was adopted. Another admitted she "just wanted to fit in" as it was difficult to explain when kids would ask her questions about her looks. Some members of Group IV shared their mixed feelings about being sent to Korean culture camps, which were emerging at the time they reached adolescence. Some participants stated that they appreciated their parents' desire to expose them to Korean culture and help them to normalize their experiences of being adopted, but it "did not change the painful parts of (an) adoptee's experiences." Group VI members, however, generally viewed culture camps as helpful and a sign that their parents cared.

There were lengthy discussions by all the groups about adoptees' parents and families. One person remembered her father giving her the original documents of her adoption as a Christmas gift, but her mother questioning the importance of this gesture. Another recalled that her parents "didn't want to deal" with the fact that their child was Korean and pretended as if she was Caucasian. Many appreciated their parents' desire to expose them to Korean culture, but almost all agreed that it was more beneficial if their parents maintained their own level of interest in Korea for themselves, allowing the adopted person to "move in and out of that interest without feeling pressured." Participants who had other Korean adopted siblings found that these relationships helped them feel less lonely but, having a Korean sibling did not guarantee acceptance and sense of belonging.

For some adoptees, growing up with stories told by their adoptive families served as a reminder of a painful past. Some shared that they were given sketchy information about their adoption story. One person revealed, "my mom told me my birth mother could have been a prostitute. I didn't want to ask questions." Others described their parents' discomfort when they asked them questions about their adoption history. One person shared that her "parents acted like my life started when I was adopted. (They) wanted to protect me, but didn't really know how to handle it; they tried their best but sometimes were off-base." Others were told they were "chosen" and felt special or comforted to believe they were a "child of God." Another person shared that her mother was adopted and seemed to explain things well, but that it also helped to be in a "play group with other Korean adopted kids."

Many of the participants who were mothers themselves grappled with their birth mothers' decisions to place them for adoption. Some were in awe of the difficulty their mothers faced in making such decisions, but most stated that they were unable to comprehend how their mothers could have made such decisions. Coming to terms with being relinquished or "abandoned" was one area in which participants were not able to comfort each other. One facilitator described how her group "was stuck and just sat there" when someone asked "how could a woman ever give up a child?" Pregnancy and fertility brought forth some strong fears and apprehension among many of the younger women in Groups IV through VI, as many of their adoptive mothers had faced infertility issues. Many wondered if they would be able to get pregnant at all and whether they would be good mothers.

With the exception of Group VI, participants in each of the groups reported abuse by adoptive families. Between one quarter and one third of the participants in each group stated that they had been abused. The reality of abuse by adoptive parents led many participants to question how adoptive parents were selected and whether the selection process has changed over time.

Gratitude was another pervasive theme. Some adoptees felt that their adoptive parents expected them to be grateful for being adopted, and they expressed ambivalence about these expectations. Most of the participants shared that they were grateful for being adopted, but realized that it came at a high price of losing their culture, country, and parts of their identity. One participant recounted her mother saying, "Do you know where you would be now if we had not done this? You could be a prostitute. Your brother might be a beggar..." Others recalled comments by other adults referring to them as a "charity mission." Some felt that such comments produced a will to be the best, but others felt the comments made them rebel. Commenting on the theme of gratitude, some facilitators noted that most of the adoptees in their groups believed that their lives had been saved through adoption, but they struggled with how much gratitude was "enough."

Loss and abandonment were other common themes. In Groups I through III, some participants stated that the losses they experienced at an early age had long term effects on their relationships, with mistrust being a common issue. Groups IV through VI also identified problems with trust, with some participants describing an inability to commit, a tendency to become very controlling, and "pushing away" from relationships. Other participants, however, stated that they "grabbed onto anyone just to feel as if they belonged to someone." Not all participants, however, believed that these patterns were associated with loss, attributing them

instead to individual personalities. The majority of the participants expressed more pain regarding the loss of their birth culture and the lack of a connectedness to Korea than the loss of a person or a relative as a result of adoption.

Discrimination

Discrimination was the key focus of the conversation in all groups and pervaded all aspects of the conversation - from family life, to dating, to community, to school experiences and, ultimately, to the way participants chose to identify themselves. Most of the participants expressed pain, anger, and sadness as a result of the discrimination they experienced, and for many, being at *The Gathering* was the first time they shared these feelings. Many participants were the only Asians in the communities in which they were raised. Their presence generally was handled in one of two ways: either it was considered socially taboo to discriminate against the only Korean child in the community; or there was overt discrimination including racial slurs. Participants and facilitators alike recognized that little has changed over the past 50 years and that society has not developed any greater tolerance of difference.

Many adoptees found assumptions about them and their families to be discriminatory. Often, by virtue of their appearance, adoptees were expected to speak Korean or another Asian language and were quizzed about their ability to speak English with no accent. Others were assumed to be from Asian countries other than Korea. One adoptee described being mistaken for a nanny when she was with her own children, and another described being mistaken for the wait-staff in a restaurant. Some female adoptees expressed discomfort when walking with their adoptive fathers as they believed that people may assume they were "the other woman." One adoptee admitted that she made it a point of calling out loudly, "Dad." Another participant - whose adoptive father was Chinese - revealed that she used to only want to be seen in public with her father and not with her Caucasian mother. On the other hand, another adoptee disclosed that "Growing up, I wanted to identify only with White people, not even with my Korean adoptive mother." Although the majority of adoptees experienced discrimination while they were growing up, there were some who reported no discrimination whatsoever and others who reported that they did not experience discrimination until later in life.

Many participants spoke about the painful reality of wanting their adoptive parents to know about and understand their experiences with discrimination, but knowing that their adoptive parents could not fully relate to these experiences. Some participants shared that it was too difficult to tell their parents, or they simply chose not to tell their parents in

order to protect them. One adoptee tearfully related, for the first time in his life, that every day one kid shoved his face in the snow and called him 'chink baby.' He recalls never telling his parents, not wanting to upset them.

Some adoptees chose to handle discrimination alone because their parents' responses were not helpful. They described responses by their parents such as, "oh, you're just so wonderful!" as doing little to soothe them and as only distancing their parents from them. Participants commented that it did not console them when their parents shared their own perspectives rather than joining their children in their hurt. "We don't want our parents to fix things by giving us answers." The consensus from adoptees was that they needed someone to be with them and share their unhappiness and not attempt to talk them out of feeling hurt or humiliated. One adoptee admitted, "If my mom had just said once that she didn't understand...but would try, it would have made a world of difference to me." Other adoptees, however, focused more on the love they received from their parents, their parents' ability to ground them in times of adversity, and the willingness of their parents to try to understand what they were experiencing. Even when parents did not understand the impact of discrimination, adoptees showed few signs of bitterness, and in many cases accepted the reality that their parents could do little about the situation.

Some participants painfully reported racism and prejudice within their own families. One African-American/Korean adoptee shared how her mother told her not to tell anyone that she was Korean. Another shared how she has been trying to forgive her family "for being small-minded or ignorant and for not doing more." Another adoptee stated that she "built a wall around music, science and math" as her parents expected her to excel in these areas.

Experiences of discrimination and rejection also extended to contacts with other Koreans. Some adoptees described negative reactions when Koreans realized that they did not speak Korean, and some felt that Korean people had difficulty relating to them because they were adopted. Others were hurt by the rejection of other Koreans because they were too Western. They felt that they should have been embraced by the Korean community. Many adoptees also felt quite "foreign" when they visited Korea. The experiences adoptees had with other Koreans led to a discussion of Korean adoptees' own prejudices and biases toward Asians - their tendency to examine Koreans through their own Western lens and to make assumptions from that perspective.

Adoptees differed in the ways in which they responded to the

discrimination they experienced. Some adoptees expressed comfort in being different and being unique and reported little or no negative feelings about discrimination. Others sought to live in more ethnically diverse settings, rearranging their lives so they would not "stand out."

Identity

A key area of discussion was the question of how adult Korean adoptees identify themselves. For some participants, the identification of self within an American or European culture was still "a work in progress." For most of the participants, issues related to personal and ethnic identity became most important when they entered college or were away from their families. One adoptee stated that college was a time when "I couldn't link my identity to my family anymore."

Both European and American adoptees raised similar issues regarding identity development. Most participants reported that as they were growing up, they sought to "fit in," tried to identify with the majority culture, and wanted blond hair and blue eyes. Many adoptees knew no other Koreans when they were growing up. Others only saw Korean people in roles as "dry cleaners and manicurists." One person from England felt she had no sense of cultural identity, and for her, "Korea was just a word." Some Danish adoptees stated that they identified their adoptive families and felt Danish, not Korean. For some, the choice of being Korean was not possible. These adoptees lived in a world in which people were either black or white, and many adoptees chose to be white. One person stated, "In high school, I saw African- Americans as role models; and then in college I wanted to be super white; now I want to be myself, Korean-American." There were some adoptees who felt pressured to be more Korean and "the only group I feel like I belong to" is the Korean adoptee community.

There were some, however, that celebrated the differences in their families and chose to encompass everything that was a part of them, rather than choosing to put themselves in one "box." Others felt the power they had in their duality, finding the balance in being Korean and American/European. "By virtue of being adopted, we're in a gray area between two circles, and that's where we fit." One adoptee shared her experience of being the only minority person in a sorority and recruiting as many minorities as she could. There were also a fair number of adoptees who acknowledged their parents for appreciating the fact that Koreans and other Asians were not a part of their communities and who sought Korean and other Asian role models for them, helping them to appreciate their individual identities.

Each group noted the sparsity of Asians with whom they could positively identify and pointed out that none of the Asian role models who readily came to mind was adopted. One adoptee commented, "we are not the M.A.S.H. generation,...we are not the Charlie Chans, we are not the Katos, and we want to have positive Asian role models." Because of the absence of such role models, most Korean adoptees related to Caucasians when they were growing up - "I identified with Anthony Michael Hall, not Long Duk-Dong." An adoptee from Group I, however, observed progress in this regard: "We grew up in a Cheryl Tiegs era, and now we live in a Connie Chung era." For some of the women participants, the absence of Asian women as role models accentuated difficulties in coming to terms with their looks. Many women commented that *The Gathering* was the first opportunity to truly see and to appreciate the beauty of the Asian face.

Many adoptees wished their parents had been more aware of the consequences of their decision to adopt internationally and had viewed the family as multi-cultural rather than the adopted child as the only family member with an ethnic heritage. Other adoptees reported that their families had understood the multicultural nature of their families and that they did not grow up feeling different. Many of these adoptees, however, reported that they were told that they were different by others outside of the family or by extended family members. Several adoptees raised this issue, wondering whether adoptees owe an explanation to people who ask questions about their origins. Some adoptees felt that they should be courteous and answer questions that are put to them, but others felt that it was not the adoptee's responsibility to educate. Others shared humorous ways in which their families handled probing questions. One adoptee, for example, remembered a time when someone asked her father if she was his "real daughter," and he responded, "My wife says she is, but she looks like the man down the street."

The discussion of the participants' relationships with their adoptive families led many adoptees to share their observations on the role of adoptive parents in helping them to address issues related to race and ethnicity. Some advised that parents should start early when the child is young, such as exposing them to books and magazines that feature Asian-Americans in a positive manner. They also advised, however, that parents should give their children latitude in deciding when they want to explore their heritage and when they want to put it aside - "don't push and don't ignore it."

Many adoptees recognized the various ways their presence can influence and affect younger international adoptees and new adoptive families. They saw the power of their personal stories and expressed a

desire to share their experiences through working with younger adoptees in mentorship programs. When adoptees were asked, "What would you tell the world?," among the responses were: "don't always include 'adopted' in a designation;" "be your own advocate;" be aware that "parents pass on hang-ups, and if (they) have a hang-up - on being adopted, Korean and different - (they will) pass that on to (their) children;" "an adoptee's search of a cultural identity is not a rejection of his parents;" and adoptees need role models.

Many of the participants expressed that as adults, they now were fully aware of their options - to live anywhere, to return to Korea, or to define themselves as Korean-American/European or "American who happens to have Korean heritage." One woman stated, "I love that I can take parts of myself and choose - adoptee, Korean, American, woman."

Dating and Relationships

In some groups, the individuals - by virtue of their ages - focused on dating and relationships. Group III noted the large percentage of women who reported in the survey that they had married Caucasian men and wondered why so many women chose Caucasian men. Some adoptees pointed to the negative stereotypes of Asian men as being dominating and of Asian women as being exotic and submissive. One male adoptee felt that "families didn't want their daughters violated by Asian men." Married members of Group III simply stated that they married Caucasians because there were not any Asian men in their communities when they dated. One woman stated that she was more comfortable with Caucasian men because "culture is not your face." Others felt the subject of dating was a non-issue because a person does not date a person's appearance, but the person's personality.

Perceptions of peers and members of the adoptee's community also contributed to the extent to which participants dated. One adoptee stated that "girls (in my neighborhood) didn't befriend you because you didn't have that popular look, and the guys didn't date you, but they were all your friends." Others reported the assumption held by friends that if there was another Asian person in school or at the university, that person would be the ideal mate for the adoptee. Even in church, a fellow parishioner advised against interracial marriage because "God doesn't let cardinals marry robins," to which another participant pertly questioned, "like birds marry?"

Adoptees who chose to date Asians also reported issues that had to be overcome. One woman shared that her husband's "mother had a very hard time with (me) being adopted." Many women struggled with feeling

objectified: "I thought love was love until I found someone who treated me...just (as) an ideal because of being Asian."

Relationships to Korea

For some participants, Korea represented their "homeland"; for others it remained a distant foreign place; and for yet others, Korea was the home from which they had been "banished." Many adoptees believed that a visit to Korea was important, although the circumstances surrounding such visits may vary. Those who had traveled to Korea recommended a visit to an orphanage, although many described culture shock and mixed emotions from that experience. Many adoptees stressed the importance of emotional maturity and readiness as the trip to Korea could be a "dose of reality." Adoptees commented: "it is not home," "it is too hard to do it alone," it can revive abandonment issues for the adoptee, and it can force the adoptee to let go of what had been her "story." For example, one adoptee shared her reaction when she learned that her adoption occurred because her birth father left her family.

Some participants expressed strong feelings about Korea: anger regarding the way orphans are perceived by Koreans; concerns about the large number of children still in orphanages; and a social obligations to help children remaining in Korea. One participant shared his having met an adult who, as an orphan child, was never adopted and the sadness this man felt, knowing that had he been adopted, there would have been the possibility of another life. There was a strong sense of responsibility on the part of a majority of the adoptees to facilitate change in Korea's view of adoption and adoptees as something shameful, and a moral responsibility to improve the situation for institutionalized children.

Search and Reunion

In Group I, many participants reported that they believed that even if they attempted to search, they would not be able to find members of their birth families after so many years. That perception, however, was quickly rectified when other participants revealed their stories of search and reunion with their biological families. Those who had reunited with their families shared a range of experiences. Some felt a sense of distrust and uncertainty as to the expectations of their new family members, with the question of "what next" prevalent in their minds and a sense that there was a need for boundaries. Others felt that they were being pulled into something with which they were not comfortable. One person described an experience in which her birth mother called to tell her that she was coming to the U.S. the following day and asked her to pick her up at the airport. That situation led to a discussion of what should be done once ties

have been established with birth family members.

Much of the discussion regarding search and reunion focused on birth mothers. One participant asked, "what about the fathers, why do we never talk about meeting our fathers?" Few participants ventured into this area. One adoptee, however, tearfully shared her experience of learning that her birth father, who died just before she returned to Korea, always had a photograph of her in his breast pocket and told anyone who would listen that his daughter was in America and would someday return to Korea to see him.

Many participants expressed ambivalence about search and reunion, and some of the groups spent little time on this subject. One person shared that she would like to see someone with her likeness, "but not necessarily meet." Another stated that she had "no desire to meet my birth mother, my life began at adoption. In some groups, the issues associated with searching brought out a great deal of emotion. One person who searched and found nothing felt as if she had been left with "no hope." Others shared how they looked for resemblances among the crowds of people in Korea. Participants generally agreed that regardless of whether a search led to a reunion and beyond, the process was important, or, in the words of one participant, "the process helps with acceptance of oneself."

Adoptees in all of the groups emphasized the need for search preparation and low expectations. In choosing to conduct a search, some adoptees realized they had to exchange their fantasies for realities. Adoptees revealed: "the story on your papers may not be true;" "some kids are abandoned and not loved;" abandonment may not always be the cause for adoption; and there may be papers, such as letters from birth family members, that have been waiting to be read. In each group, questions were raised regarding who should initiate the search process (and to whom searches "belong") and why many adoptive parents are so focused on this issue. Most participants, however, agreed that younger adoptees should return to Korea to visit. A number of adoptees believed that "children (should) wait until they are older to search," and group members tended to have strong feelings about whether they would have been ready to search at a younger age.

Perceptions of Adoption

The realities of adoption were exposed in very emotional ways by various testimonials by adoptees - stories describing the pain and the joy of being adopted. There were many who celebrated the "resiliency of the human spirit," and there were others who continued to feel the loss and

hurt of being "given up." Some adoptees courageously shared negative experiences related to their adoptions, and many of these adoptees felt that the promise of a better life through adoption was never fulfilled. Despite the many questions about how adoptive parents were chosen and many statements of mistrust of adoption agencies, few adoptees expressed dissatisfaction with the institution of adoption. Most adoptees described their adoption experience as positive and ongoing - "adoption is a process." The international nature of *The Gathering* led many adoptees to refer to "chance" and "fate" and to view their life courses as arbitrary. As several adoptees noted, they could have been speaking English with a Danish or Swedish accent.

The Spouses and Partners Discussion Group

Spouses and partners of the Korean adoptees expressed a high level of appreciation for being included in *The Gathering*, and although their group discussion was less emotionally charged than the discussions in the adoptee groups, they were quite forthcoming and reflected a diversity of opinions. As the survey reflected, the majority of the spouses and partners were Caucasian and male. Spouses and partners attributed their participation in *The Gathering* to a desire to support the adoptee participant, an interest in the experiences of adoptees, and a desire to find ways to talk about adoption with their significant others.

Experiences of the spouses and partners with adoption. Most spouses' and partners' understanding of adoption was gleaned from their significant others. Most participants had a general sense of adoption as presenting both positive and negative experiences. Many attempted to understand the "filter" of the adoption experience for their significant others, particularly in relation to feeling different and dealing with issues of trust and abandonment. There were some who were still struggling to understand the significance of their partner's adoption experience.

Some spouses and partners wondered whether some of the behaviors of their adopted partners could be attributed to being adopted. Although many had never thought about connecting their partners' behavior to having been adopted, one spouse shared that his wife would withdraw when she would get angry and become silent for up to several days. Several other partners shared the same experience. Some participants also noted their spouses' unusual relationship with food and how that relationship might be a manifestation of their partners' early life, when they felt compelled to hoard.

Some spouses and partners commented on stories shared by the adoptee's family about their adopted partners' childhood. Some of the

spouses and partners felt that the families trivialized the pain of their partner's early experiences in the manner in which they retold the stories. Some spouses and partners also related that their partners were abused by their adoptive families.

Many spouses and partners observed that their adopted partners saw themselves as Caucasian and identified with their adoptive families while growing up, but as adults, their sense of identity changed in the direction of incorporating their Korean heritage into their identities. Some spouses and partners thought this change was "great," but others were not certain how they fit into their partner's evolving ethnic identity. Some participants commented that in the general population, a person does not identify herself one way ethnically and later shift her identity to a different designation.

Dating and marriage. Observing that most of the members of the group were the Caucasian partners of Korean adoptees, the participants emphasized geographic factors (the fact that they and their partners grew up within the same community) and the fact that the adoptees' parents were Caucasian. One issue was the extent to which partners saw themselves as part of a transracial couple. One spouse said he had not viewed his relationship as transracial nor thought of his wife as a member of a different ethnic group. Others noted that although they and their partners were ethnically different, it was less significant than their common socio-cultural backgrounds. Although some spouses and partners identified various stereotypes that Asian women face, they rarely applied these stereotypes to their wives. Many spouses and partners, however, believed that adoptive families expected their adopted daughters to be "docile females."

Experiences with discrimination. For some of the spouses, marriage to Korean adoptees brought new understanding of racism. Many spouses and partners observed that it was "stunning" to be at *The Gathering* and find themselves to be the minority - an experience that made them think about what it must be like for their adopted partners to be a minority everywhere else. Many spouses and partners reported that the Asian community discriminated against them. Most spouses and partners reported that they did not encounter objections from their own families regarding their choice of a spouse or partner. They were far more disturbed about the level of discrimination they perceived from their partner's adoptive family toward the adoptee. Many spouses, however, stated that they had not thought much about racial issues until they decided to have children. Some encountered racism from their own families on this issue. One person, for example, shared his family's disdain for biracial children, questioning whether he was really going to have

"zebra babies."

The few Asian partners in the group shared a similar sense of disconnection from the Asian American community as their adopted partners, reporting that they often dated Caucasians before they met their current partner. These spouses and partners reported a strong connection with many of the issues that confronted their adopted Korean partners, especially regarding their Asian identity.

Going to Korea and birth searching. Many of the spouses and partners had accompanied the adoptee participants to Korea. Most of the spouses and partners expressed a high level of interest in their partners' searches for birth family, but they were clear that they wanted to be respectful of their partners. Spouses and partners felt that they could be of help in concrete ways, such as broadly defining the success of the trip to Korea in relation to a number of goals - seeing the country, learning a bit about the history of Korea, and visiting the orphanage - and de-emphasizing a goal that focused on finding birth family members.

Participants were cognizant of the realities of searching and were aware of the effects that searching may have on birth families. They expressed deep concern for their adopted partners and worried that their partners would feel disappointment from too high expectations. Spouses and partners offered a number of ways to support their partners through the search process: follow the lead of the adoptee, keep expectations realistic, acknowledge that success includes connection to Korean culture, recognize shortcomings in translation and record-keeping, and provide comfort and support.

Some spouses and partners highlighted the lack of control in some search situations. One spouse described his trip to Korea with his wife as "a circus." The adoptee was interviewed by a Korean television station and a newspaper to publicize her search for a connection with birth family members. The couple was not prepared for the intrusive and personal questions or the "soap opera or talk-show approach" that they experienced, but they felt they needed to go public in order to succeed in their search.

Partners and spouses expressed a high level of interest in adopting, and some already had adopted or were in the process of adopting. One spouse shared that his wife being adopted helped their adopted son. Although many participants expressed concerns about the cost of adoption, they were hopeful that international adoption could be a positive experience. Many were anxious to share their experience at *The Gathering* with their partners and families and realized that they also could

serve as role models for the next generation of adoptees and to other mixed-race children.

Facilitators' Observations

The facilitators of each of the groups were adoption professionals with many years of experience in the field of international adoption practice and policy. The facilitators saw *The Gathering* as a time for healing and sharing. One facilitator, for example, remarked on the absence of bitterness and recrimination in her group and the participants' ability to get through painful experiences and gain strength from their resiliency.

Another facilitator was struck by many immigration-related issues with which adoptees struggle: discrimination, stereotypes, loneliness, and references to Korea as "my home country." The distinction between adoptive families and immigrant families, however was clear: immigrating families learn humor and coping skills together and support each other whereas most adoptive families cannot provide adoptees with coping skills related to racism and discrimination. The facilitators believed that the next generation of international adoptees will be better equipped to deal with such issues.

Facilitators noted that most of the participants felt a deep sense of fidelity to their adoptive parents, were protective of their parents' love, and acknowledged that their parents had tried their best. They also noted that participants strongly reacted to the very painful adoption stories shared by some of the adoptees and were clear in their expectations that the process of adoption has changed and the selection of adoptive parents has become more rigorous.

Although participants' attitudes toward adoption varied, the facilitators observed a strong sense of respect for the differing opinions that were expressed and true empathy for those struggling to find their voice. Participants in no case rejected the perspectives of others, but simply made the statement, "that was not my experience."

The facilitators also observed the remarkable connectedness among participants as they were "trying to find others with the same experiences, same beginnings." "People were networking everywhere you looked, exchanging phone numbers and e-mail addresses." Several facilitators observed how successful and capable the participants were and wondered why the media portrays them as "struggling." As adoptive parents, many facilitators observed, "I would like anyone in this room to spend time with my children."

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IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION PRACTICE AND POLICY

The Gathering was a unique opportunity to listen to the myriad voices of adult Korean adoptees. Understanding the experiences of adult adoptees offers an opportunity for adoption agencies to examine and enhance their international adoption practice and policy and provide quality services for all members of the adoption triad. The following recommendations emerged from *The Gathering*:

Adult adoptees as educators. Adult adoptees - on panels, in group sessions, or on videotape - should be asked to share their adoption experiences with prospective adoptive parents and adoptive parents. Agencies can educate parents about the realities of international adoption through the involvement of those who have lived and are living the adoption journey.

Adult adoptees as staff and board members. Adult international adoptees should be considered for staff positions to strengthen international adoption practice. Their active participation on agency boards of directors can also support the work of agencies in the international adoption arena.

Parent preparation for transracial adoption. The adult adoptees highlighted skills of good parents that were most important to them as members of multicultural families: listening, supporting, validating, and being creative in addressing issues of culture and adoption. Experiential trainings for prospective and adoptive parents should be integrated into agencies' programs to support adoptive families' strengths in parenting and raising an adopted child of a different race.

Standards for adoptive parent selection. It is important to note that the majority of adult adoptees expressed skepticism about the adoption process and the manner in which adoptive parents are selected, prepared for international adoption, and provided with ongoing educational opportunities. Their high level of support for more stringent standards of international adoption practice - and, particularly, more rigorous selection processes for adoptive parents - is also found in the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption. Agencies should place great weight on adoptees' expectations of agency practice in the selection of new adoptive parents.

Post-adoption programs. Agencies have developed programs for adoptive parents and young adoptive families, but few offer services for

adult adoptees, particularly after they establish themselves independently from their adoptive families. The majority of adoptees expressed a strong desire to remain connected with one other. The growing numbers of international adult adoptee organizations is an indication that such a service is needed. Agencies should establish relationships with these organizations, involving their members as speakers on panels, organizing mentorship programs for younger international adoptees with their assistance, and involving them in culture camps and motherland visits.

Staff training. Agencies should conduct ongoing staff training on life issues for adoptees and update staff on adoption research and practice developments. Through an enhanced understanding of current trends and skill-building in family and adoptee counseling, staff will be better prepared to assist adoptees with the lifelong issues they face.

Racism and discrimination. Discrimination is one of the most profound issues which adult Korean adoptees must face. Although the impact of discrimination varies from one adoptee to another, adoptive parents should be helped to understand its relevance for their children and not ignore or minimize its effects. Parents currently seeking to adopt a child internationally should have the opportunity to listen and learn from adult adoptees - understand the issues their children will face and learn how to assist them to live in a society that has not yet developed a tolerance for difference.

Other international adoption programs. The experiences of adult Korean adoptees is not unique to Korean adoptions. Many of the issues of identity, discrimination, and connection to birth culture are universal to all children adopted internationally. The stories shared by the largest and oldest population of intercountry adoptees serves as a strong model for the future of international adoption and should be made readily available to other adoptees and their families.

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