Chapter 11

The Construction of Imaginary Homelands

During my initial fieldwork in Copenhagen in June 2009, I was invited to a Korean-Japanese restaurant called Miga by two Danish-Korean adoptees, Stefanie and Fredrik, who were active in the Korean adoption association in Denmark. They wanted to know about my project and help me find potential informants. Shortly after I got there, a friend of theirs happened to pass by. Stefanie introduced me to Emma, who is also adopted from South Korea and was invited to join us for dinner.

I felt privileged to be eating for the first time Korean food prepared and served in the traditional Korean manner. Over the array of exotic food, the conversation turned to the topic of the construction of imaginary homelands as an empowering and disempowering processes among transcolor adoptees.

Inspired by Salman Rushdie’s1 theory of imaginary homelands, Stefanie contended that transcolor adoptees cannot acquire a sense of empowerment since they are forced to construct a low self-image based on the “superior” Western culture that disempowered them. In contrast with second-generation immigrants, transcolor adoptees’ construction of their imaginary homeland is totally illusory and more fragile because the former have ties with kith and kin from their home countries, whereas the genealogical connection of the adoptees has been severed. Moreover, transcolor adoptees have no way of testing their cultural understanding of their birth country because it is constructed on Western superiority. Therefore, Danish-Korean adoptees construct a Korean culture that is already disempowered.

Emma listened attentively to Stephanie’s argument and agreed with her basic assumptions but suggested that adoptees can gain a sense of empowerment within the social constraints that potentially disempower them.

Stefanie later told me that there is an ongoing debate in the Korean adoptee community as to whether adoptees can gain a sense of

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empowerment. The interesting point is that these two contrasting views represented by Stefanie and Emma are discussed by Salman Rushdie in his theory imaginary homelands. The term “imaginary homeland” was coined by Salman Rushdie writing from the perspective of an immigrant who is “out-of-country” and is haunted by the sense of loss. Rushdie muses on what it’s like to write about the place you’ve left behind. To what extent it’s possible to restore the past to yourself. To what extent it’s a real place. And to what extent it’s an imaginary one? Writing about “his India” from an English context, Rushdie is aware that the physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that “we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indians of the mind.”

Despite the passage of time, distorted, and fragmentary memory, he is nevertheless convinced that it is possible to use the “broken mirror” as a valuable and useful tool with which to work in the present in order to reclaim his land and his history.

Stefanie’s observation is very much in line with the experience of my informants who revisit their birth country; however, I believe that they go through different levels of empowering as well as disempowering processes. In certain instances, they may even achieve a sense of empowerment from a process that might be considered disempowering.

This chapter focuses on those informants who chose to revisit their birth country. It follows them on their journey to the unknown and explores how the experience contributes to their sense of empowerment and disempowerment. Two related ideologies need to be mentioned before we continue; the child rescue ideology about poor kids being saved from the third world and the importance of biogenetic ties that impinge on the narratives of my informants as they journey to their birth country.

**Solidarity With the Third World and Child Rescue Ideology**

Most adoptees feel they ought to be grateful and thankful for what they have in terms of economic and social status, opportunities, food on the table, and the luxury of living in Western society.

(Anna, adopted from Chile by Swedish parents)

The majority of my informants have a lifetime’s experience of having to be grateful for being saved from the third world by loving parents. This systematic and repeated message may be relayed by strangers, friends, parents of friends, relatives, and in some cases even by their adoptive parents.

Aren’t you glad that you were adopted to Denmark? Like it was good. So I had this idea of Korea being a poor and undeveloped country.

(Else, adopted from South Korea by Danish parents)

I should be thankful, it’s like a mantra... What I understood was that I always have to be thankful that I came to Sweden... My mother told me she bought