

# An International Adoptee and Her Father Speak

By

Wendy Clark and Roger Clark

On January 14, 2015, Maggie Jones, an adoptive mother of two children, one internationally, published “Why a Generation of Adoptees is Returning to South Korea” in the *New York Times* magazine section. Jones found adult Korean-American adoptees who were dissatisfied with their own experiences, as well as that of their birth mothers who had occasionally felt forced to give up their children for international adoption. Some of these children were now leading a movement to ban international adoption, at least from relatively wealthy nations like South Korea. She also found adult adoptees who were much more positive about international adoption, but still wished to live in their birth country for one reason or another. Jones’ thoughtful piece led Wendy, an adult adoptee from South Korea, and her adoptive father, Roger, to reflect on issues raised by Jones’ article. Here are some of their reflections.

**Issues of racism.** *One of the problems expressed by Jones’ respondents is that, growing up, they had experienced subtle and overt forms of racism that their adoptive parents, protected or blinded by some version of white privilege, couldn’t adequately anticipate, identify with or help them strategize about. These are issues that could arise, of course, in all inter-racial adoptions, whether international or not.*

**Wendy:** Adoption is a wonderful opportunity for those who want but can’t have birth children. It’s also a fine way for people to have children even if they can have biological children. I’m a twenty-four year old South Korean female. My adoptive parents are white. I’ve lived in Rhode Island since I was about four months old. I view my being an international adoptee as a never-ending journey.

I grew up in a nice neighborhood in Providence. During my elementary school years, I wasn’t as aware of how different I was from other children around me. Most of my friends were also of a different race from the white majority. For middle and high school, I ended up in a private school. More than half of the students around me were white. My parents wanted me to receive the best possible education. At the time, education meant nothing to me; it was all about fitting in.

I became more aware of my race and my adoption. I would receive taunting and racist comments from boys at summer camp. Students in my school would tease me for the shape of my eyes. “Can you even read the board?” they would ask while motioning to their eyes to make them ‘slanty,’ like mine.

My high school years were a terrible time. I struggled the most during this time with fitting in while also trying to figure out my true identity. I wasn’t accepting of my

adoption. I didn't accept my parents. They embarrassed me. I was embarrassed by my own self. At the time, I wanted to be an average white American. I wanted blonde hair with blue eyes. I wanted to do everything the other white kids in my school were doing. I HAD to fit in. I distanced myself from non-whites as much as possible.

One day, during my sophomore year, my English teacher was showing the class a video about a poet we were studying. He fast-forwarded through part of the video in which an Asian-American man was reading poetry. A student asked why he was fast-forwarding, and my teacher replied, "Because I hate Asians. Especially Wendy." He looked right at me with a smirk on his face as the class broke out in an awkward laughter. I didn't find his comments amusing or comical. I told one of my friends that I was hurt and didn't know what to do. She was African-American and found no humor in this situation either. She told me to go to the head of the school and report what had happened because it was extremely inappropriate. Another one of my classmates overheard us talking and told me our teacher was "just joking. He's a cool dude." This student was white. I ended up reporting the incident and the teacher had to apologize to me. But this didn't help much.

About halfway through my sophomore year, I began to face severe depression and anxiety. I missed almost half the school year as a senior. I hated myself. I didn't care if I graduated from high school. My only question was what my purpose in life was. I started to see a therapist. Coincidentally, he had adopted one of his daughters from China. We worked together for years and dug deep into the root of my depression. It all stemmed from my adoption and being abandoned right after I was born. I still see the same therapist today, but along with my life experiences and keying in on my sadness, he's helped me shape and grow into a happier person, more accepting of myself.

**Roger:** As Wendy suggests, my wife Bev, Wendy's mother, and I (both European-Americans) do indeed feel fortunate to have been able to adopt Wendy and her older brother, Adam, from Korea. Adam arrived as an infant, in 1986; Wendy, also as an infant, in 1991. My father was still alive to greet both of them, with us, at Logan Airport in Boston. He was 75 when Adam arrived and very soon was telling us how, after Adam, all European-American children seemed "undercooked" by comparison, implying that Adam's slightly darker color was just right. I've often wondered whether there wasn't some racism underlying this clear effort at reverse-racism. But it felt so welcoming of Adam, and eventually Wendy, and so accepting of Bev and me, that I hardly cared. He was acknowledging the differences within our family and embracing them.

My father, an old-fashioned liberal who professed the equality of all human beings, wasn't blind to socially-defined differences like race and gender. He saw very early, however, that Wendy was a smart and athletic child and saw in her someone who was very similar to my mother, his wife, who had died seven years before Wendy's arrival. Again, my father was embracing our children, trying to make them a seamless part of our family. As a professional sociologist, I knew that he was unusual in his capacity to appreciate and accept difference, and recognize a common humanity. As a human being, I had more difficulty keeping in mind the differences that distinguished me from my adopted children than perhaps he did. I was a little too like one of the least attractive adoptive parents mentioned in Jones' article, a man who claimed he didn't see color, insofar as I tended to ignore color . . . until others made color relevant. In retrospect, I wish I'd taken a more proactive stance, one that might have helped Wendy anticipate some of the unkind cuts she describes.

And it wasn't as if others didn't offer foreshadowing, even before Wendy started sharing the news. Bev and I were often approached in the supermarket or

drugstore and asked, "Are they your children?" And, "Are they brother and sister?" I tended to offer simple 'yeses' in my responses, failing to take advantage of these teachable moments, partly out of the fear of emphasizing differences to my children. Bev, on the other hand, tended to give fuller answers ("Yes. They're our adopted children from Korea." "Yes. Now they are.")

I could have taken a more proactive stance and told both Wendy and Adam that they could anticipate hurtful comments based on physical difference. If I had done that, they then might have felt they had more of an invitation to tell us about unwanted comments. Wendy did let us know when the high school English teacher made the "I hate Asians" remark and we helped her contact the school administration and make clear how painful that had been and seek a resolution. But Wendy was less likely to tell us of the barbs from fellow students and so had to deal with those largely on her own (Adam never did tell us of such barbs, though he now admits they came his way). Bev and I had been grateful to find a good, racially diverse elementary school for Wendy. But when the trade-off was between racial diversity and schools with excellent educational reputations in middle school and high school, we chose the latter. In retrospect, I regret this decision, one that we might have undone later if I'd opened the channels of communication about possible racist remarks and behaviors earlier. I wish I'd done a little more of what my father had done: that is, explicitly acknowledged differences, while also embracing them. So, if one of the implications of Jones' piece is that European-American parents of Korean-American adopted children have not always been perfectly prepared to deal with the racial prejudice their children encountered, I plead guilty. I guess the question is, "Have there been any compensations for Wendy and Adam for this shortcoming on my part?"

**Issue of Returning to Korea.** Although exact numbers are hard to come by, Jones estimates that 300 to 500 Korean-American international adoptees had returned to live in Korea by 2015. While this number is small compared to the over 200,000 that had been adopted into families in more than 15 countries since the 1950s, the vast majority, like Wendy, living in the United States, it may be indicative of a more widespread desire to return. Or it may not.

**Wendy:** I wonder almost every day if I'll ever visit Korea in the future. I think about it a lot when I'm asked if I ever want to go back. I don't have a high interest in going there anytime soon, or ever really. To me, visiting Korea would be like taking a vacation to any other country in this world. I'd be interested in the culture, the architecture, and the food, but I'd look for those things in any place new to me. I have no urge or desperation to figure out my family ties and history, though I was sometimes more interested, when I was a teenager and working on my identity, in possibly meeting my birth mother. Today I remain curious as to what my birth mother looks like, but I have no desire to try and seek her out.

**Roger:** Bev and I offered to bring Wendy and Adam, as children, to Korea on vacations, but they never took us up on the offer. Throughout his adolescence, Adam's *sine qua non* for any vacation spot was that it have a basketball court nearby, and he wasn't sure he could count on courts everywhere we might travel in Korea. Wendy was somewhat more culturally flexible, but she never jumped at the chance either. Given our desire to create family vacations that accommodated everyone's interests, we never pushed them to visit Korea.

When Wendy and Adam were growing up, we did encourage their taking an interest in Korean culture in a variety of ways. Rhode Island had an organization aimed at getting adopted children from Korea together while exploring certain aspects of Korean culture, like Korean

food and clothing. Another group provided Korean language lessons that Wendy took for a while. Adam found a needed source of self-discipline, he has observed, by taking, and eventually giving, once he'd earned his black belt, lessons in *Tae Kwon Do*, the Korean martial art he studied from ages 9 to 15. Bev's Korean chicken and beef remain favorites at family gatherings, perhaps especially for Adam's wife, Kristina, who, though European-American, always chooses the beef for her birthday dinner. Bev says she wishes we'd pushed Adam and Wendy harder to explore Korean culture, that we'd taken the decision-making about this out of their hands. But I'm not so sure. Neither Wendy nor Adam has yet decided to put Korea on their lists of travel destinations as independent adults. And that's okay with me too.

As social scientists are well aware, lives may generally follow relatively predictable courses, but any individual life course will be set by contingent attitudes, opportunities and behaviors that are much less predictable. A very small percentage of Korean adoptees, Jones points out, have chosen to live at least some of their lives in Korea. Some of their stories made Jones' piece fascinating reading. Adam and Wendy may be representative of a larger group of Korean adoptees for whom such a choice, so far, has been less compelling.

***Issue of Ending or Curbing International Adoption from Korea.*** *Some returning adoptees, Jones reports, helped to enact 2012 Korean legislation that has probably curbed international adoption, by making women receive counseling and wait seven days before placing a child for adoption. All adoption now must be registered through the courts, giving adoptees a way of tracing the history later in life, if they choose to. The effort of returning adoptees to curb international adoption may be an indication of a more widespread wish by adoptees that international adoption be stopped. Or it may not.*

**Wendy:** The issue of ending or curbing international adoption from Korea is new to me. I'd never thought about such a thing until reading Jones' article. The more I think about it, the more I see some value in setting limits on international adoption. I'm all for adoption and giving adults an opportunity to be parents, but I believe it should occur, as much as possible, within racial, if not national, boundaries. When thinking about my own experiences, I think one hard thing was that I looked so different from my parents. This led to questions, and looks, from friends and strangers that were sometimes uncomfortable, though over time I've come to roll with those punches. On the other hand, Adam never seemed to be as put off by such inquiries (and looks) as I was, so I believe the discomfort created by apparent racial differences with one's parents may itself depend on differences in personal experience and personality.

**Roger:** I too had my eyes opened by Jones' reports of returned Korean adoptees trying to legally curb international adoption from Korea. I certainly see advantages to giving adoptees an avenue for tracing their biological family histories, as the new law does by registering adoptions through the courts. I was not aware of the history of unwed mothers being cared for during their pregnancies by adoption agencies that sometimes told them they'd be selfish if they kept their children. To the degree that the new laws inhibit such practices, they are clearly justified.

I also see potential advantages to keeping mothers from frivolously giving children up for adoption, but I find it hard to believe this is common practice. The new hurdles, to the degree that they attempt to compel women to keep children they don't want, remind me of legal efforts, by Pro-Life advocates, to mandate counseling before abortion in the United States to make women feel self-conscious and uncomfortable about their decision. But, unlike Pro-Life advocates, the new legislation's advocates cannot guarantee a viable adoption market in Korea itself, since, as Jones

notes, “Koreans are generally not comfortable ‘raising another’s child,’ as Koreans [themselves] say.” And so they seem to be saying to the birth mothers, “Please keep your birth children, whatever your circumstances.”

Bev is less skeptical about efforts to curb international adoption than I am. At some point, she became aware that one interpretation of international adoption is that it is comparable to US exploitation of other countries’ natural resources. Her self-justification was that children born out of wedlock in Korea received considerable stigma and were not readily welcomed into existing families, whether through adoption or otherwise. Nevertheless, she had a nagging sense that international adoption made it easier for South Koreans to avoid facing the problem and finding ways to incorporate such children into their birth cultures. I’m not so sure.

I am aware that my skepticism about curbing international adoptions is born of something like a self-justifying rationalization. We adopted Adam after Bev and I discovered we were infertile and that, because of our age, a domestic adoption could take years. Adopting Adam, and then Wendy, met our deeply-felt desires to nurture and love children. Stakeholders in the Korean political system, I recognize, are not and should not be obliged to consider such wishes. And so I will watch this political process play out with interest but no great certainty that my skepticism is justified. Jones has done me a service by pointing it out.

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**About the Authors:** Wendy J. Clark grew up in Providence, Rhode Island. She works at a hardware store in Providence and attends college part-time. Wendy enjoys feeding wild animals.

Roger Clark is a professor of sociology at Rhode Island College where he now teaches courses mainly in research methods and the sociology of gender. He is the coauthor, with Emily Stier Adler, of *An Invitation to Social Research*, currently in its fifth edition, and, with Lori Kenschaft and Desiree Ciambrone, of *Gender in Our Changing World*.