

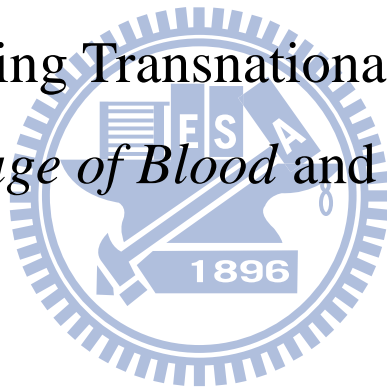
國立交通大學

外國語文學系外國文學與語言學碩士班

碩士論文

《血之語言》與《永遠的異鄉人》中  
跨國收養之再現

Representing Transnational Adoption in  
*The Language of Blood and A Gesture Life*



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## 《血之語言》與《永遠的異鄉人》中 跨國收養之再現

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### 摘 要

論文主要藉由鄭敬娥的回憶錄《血之語言》與李昌來的小說《永遠的異鄉人》探討跨國收養的再現，其對主流論述的挑戰以及跨國收養機制中的生命政治如何操控女性身體。在《血之語言》中，鄭敬娥嘗試以不同的文體呈現其經歷。身為被收養人，她透過與原生家庭的重聚找到歸屬感，並逐漸建構自我，了解其生命存在的意義與價值。文本中，鄭敬娥不僅以被收養者的身分書寫生命歷程，更深入刻畫女性身體在跨國收養下的流動。在《永遠的異鄉人》中，被收養人的過去是被刻意忽略且模糊的，僅僅透過主角的描述才隱約露出端倪。文本透過主角自身被收養與收養的雙重身分，探討跨國、跨種族、跨地域的身體流動和被收養人自我意識的轉變。此論文盼能藉由跨國收養的異質呈現來豐富、活化跨國收養的論述。

全文共分成四個部分。第一章主要探究跨國收養的根源，其中包括送養國家與收養國家的歷史文化背景、文獻回顧並探究性別在跨國收養中扮演的角色。第二章分析跨國收養的主流論述如何建構並鞏固這個機制，並探討《血之語言》的書寫對這些主流論述的挑戰。鄭敬娥不僅以其回憶錄質疑主流論述的觀點，更表達她對跨國收養的必要性的懷疑。第三章借用傅柯的生命政治理論分析李昌來的《永遠的異鄉人》中的跨國收養再現。李昌來巧妙的以慰安婦及女性跨國被收養人的遭遇呈現女性身體的流動及如何被操控。金錢的往來與利益的交換往往史的跨國收養不再單純。因此，第四章將綜合本論文的探究分析，主張對社會對跨國收養的重新思考與再教育，包括認識跨國收養的必要性、排除或降低金錢的流動與利益的交換在此機制中的作用，以及嘗試從被收養人的角度看待跨國收養及論述。

關鍵詞：跨國收養、非主流論述、生命政治、無歸屬感、被收養人、《血之語言》、《永遠的異鄉人》。

Representing Transnational Adoption in  
*The Language of Blood* and *A Gesture Life*

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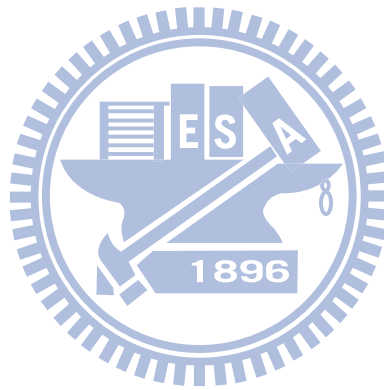
ABSTRACT

Both *The Language of Blood* and *A Gesture Life* present counternarratives to dominant transnational adoption narratives which mostly emphasize the point that transnational adoption means social benefit for children and it is a practice of humanitarianism, love, generosity, and morality. In *The Language of Blood*, the adoptee is bitter about being taken away from her birth family. Trenka directly questions the practice of transnational adoption by presenting her lived experience as an example. In *A Gesture Life*, there is a tension between the narrator's nonchalance to the practice of transnational adoption and the impact of the experience on the adoptee. Chang-rae Lee does not question transnational adoption by confronting the practice directly. By describing how the practice is taken for granted and normalized, *A Gesture Life* questions what makes transnational adoption necessary.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter focuses on examining of Korean-American adoption, starting from a general review of transnational adoption history between Korean and the U.S. and the cultural background of the practice, and precedes to engage in a study on the gender dynamics within the practice, then to an overview on current researches on transnational adoption narratives, and finally to the social context of *The Language of Blood* and *A Gesture Life*. The second part consists of an examination of the dominant discourses of transnational adoption and a close reading of *The Language of Blood* to analyze the clash between the representations of transnational adoption by the adoptee and that in the dominant narrative, and to reflect on the movement of the female body within the practice of transnational adoption. Chapter three includes a close reading of *A Gesture Life* and an analysis of the protagonist's experiences as both an adoptee and an adoptive parent, to study the sense of un-belongingness, adopter-adoptee relation, and the exploitation of women's bodies in the patriarchal ideology as involved in transnational adoption. Chapter four concludes the thesis with a suggestion that the transnational adoption narrative should be an open one to include more heterogeneous experiences in order

to educate people about what is involved and at stake in the practice of transnational adoption and to demand a rethinking on the practice of transnational adoption.

Keywords: transnational adoption, counternarrative, biopolitics, unbelongingness, adoptee, *The Language of Blood, A Gesture Life*.



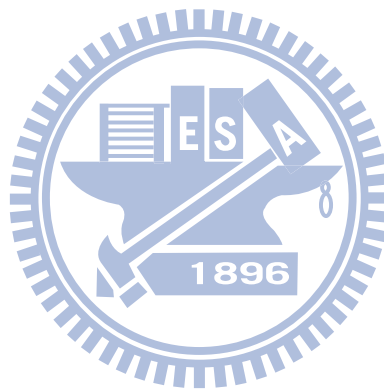
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## Chapter one:

### Historical and Cultural Background of Transnational Adoption

#### 1.1 Introduction

Back in 1984, trans/international adoptions have been described by Richard Weil as “the quiet migration.” Unlike adult or group migration, the displacement of the transnational adoptees from one country to another was “quiet” due to the little attention that it gained (Weil 276).<sup>1</sup> As a relatively new phenomenon started around 1940, transnational adoption has gradually become an important issue. With psychological, political, economic, anthropological, and social concerns within the territory of international adoption and with the articulation of previously silent adoptees, more and more scholars start researching on the subject of international adoption. Thus, the migration is no longer quiet.

In most transnational adoption narratives, adoptee’s search for the self has been one of the major issues. As some argue that root tours (tours that adoptees take to return to their birth countries help complete their identity as a whole, others maintain that identity is not fixed, and it changes with circumstances and situations.<sup>2</sup> The representation of adoption is a way of mulling over concepts such as family, kinship, and identity. It is also a means to reflect on social issues. Hence, transnational adoption/adoptee becomes a site where the story of an individual intersects with familial, social and national narratives. Both authors of *The Language of Blood* and *A Gesture Life* focus on adoptees’ quest for the self. The experiences of the protagonists in both works respectively reflect Korea’s past as a sending country and a strong

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Weil’s 1984 essay provides charts of the data of children flow and examination of the phenomenon. For a detailed analysis of international adoptions, see Weil’s *International Adoptions: The Quite Migration*.

<sup>2</sup> For essays alluding to root tours, see Homans 4-5, and Cherot.



emotional lack inside adoptees. The lack drives them to start looking for a way out: either by blinding oneself with wealth, by adopting a child from foreign country as in the case of *A Gesture Life*, or by starting a root trip in order to reunite with birth family as in *The Language of Blood*.

*The Language of Blood* is a memoir of a transnational female adoptee. The author tells how her experiences as a transnational female adoptee influence her quest for the self. Through a novelistic discourse, *A Gesture Life* depicts a male adoptee's experience of being both an adoptee and an adoptive parent. These two works provide unique and important stories about the Korean American adoptees' experiences of losses, erasures, and confusions. Critical reading of *The Language of Blood* mostly focuses on the feminized aspects of adoption. In her essay, "The Daughter's Exchange in Jane Jeong Trenka's *The Language of Blood*," Eun Kyung Min applies Freudian psychoanalysis and Levi-Straussian anthropological theory of "daughter's exchange" to interrogate the racial, cultural, national making of female subjects as transnational adoptees. Studies on *A Gesture Life* mainly discuss the social and historical phenomenon of comfort women; issues of gender, race, and nation; and post-colonialism. For instance, the adopter-adoptee relationship and the adoption writing are studied in Mark Jerng's essay, "Recognizing the Transracial Adoptee: Adoption Life Stories and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*." Jerng elaborates Freud's essay, "Constructions in Analysis," and Lacan's thoughts of transference to interpret the adopter-adoptee relationship. Eun Kyung Min and Mark Jerng have respectively applied Freudian psychoanalytic theory in analyzing adoption narratives. However, my reading aims to locate *The Language of Blood* and *A Gesture Life* in the wider domain of the imagination of global humanism in order to study the ambivalences, complexities, and losses in the practice of transnational adoption. By contextualizing transnational adoption within social and national narratives, I pay particular attention

to the complications of transnational adoption. The representations of transnational adoption in these two works are entangled with issues of gender, identity, and the adopter-adoptee relationship. Both narratives involve the adoptees' life with adoptive family after they are adopted. And the authors probe into transnational adoption process and agencies. The issues above are seldom discussed in the dominant narratives of transnational adoption. In addition to these specific issues, I would also like to investigate how gender ideology triggers the gender dynamics in transnational adoption.

My thesis is divided into three parts. The first chapter focuses on an examination of Korean-American adoption, starting from a general review of transnational adoption history between Korean and the U.S. and the cultural background of the practice, and proceeds to engage in a study on the gender dynamics within the practice, then to an overview on researches on transnational adoption narratives, and finally to the social context of *The Language of Blood* and *A Gesture Life*. The second part of my thesis consists of an examination of the dominant discourses of transnational adoption dominant discourses, and a close reading of *The Language of Blood* to analyze the clash between the representations of transnational adoption by the adoptee and the dominant narrative, and to reflect on the movement of the female body within the practice of transnational adoption. The final section includes a close reading of *A Gesture Life* and an examination of the protagonist's experiences as both an adoptee and an adoptive parent, to study the sense of un-belongingness, adopter-adoptee relation, and the exploitation of women's bodies in the patriarchal ideology in transnational adoption.

## **1.2 Historical and Cultural Background of Korean American Adoption**

After the Second World War, there have been more and more countries

involving in transnational adoption. The United States has been a significant receiving country for transnational adoptees in the postwar period. In her essay, “Intercountry Adoption as a Migratory Practice” Kristen Lovelock indicates that there have been two waves of intercountry adoption, before the mid-1970s and after the mid-1970s. The first wave has been characterized as a humanitarian concern for children and also a philanthropic response to the plight of children due to Third World’s political upheaval, poor living conditions, civil wars, natural disasters and domestic family policies. The second wave of transnational adoption comes with a different concern. Partly because of falling fertility rates in the West and because of a decrease of the supply of domestic adoptable Caucasian infants, while finding families for children was a central concern in responding to the need of orphans and abandoned children in the beginning, after the mid-1970s, seeking adoptees abroad became the primary concern. With a retrospection on the development of intercountry adoption policy and practice in the United State, Canada, and New Zealand, Lovelock argues that national needs and the needs of the citizens in these countries have priorities over the needs of the adoptees (908). The demand for children in these countries determined the number of adoption. Thus, as the concerns of transnational adoption change with time, intercountry adoption as a humanitarian gesture has turned into a system meeting the demand of childless couples; instead of finding families for children, the trend now is finding children for families (911).

In Korean American adoption history, Christianity plays an important role in encouraging this particular kind of trafficking of Asian children in both sending and receiving countries.<sup>3</sup> The Christian influence starts with the mission of “enlightening”

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<sup>3</sup> For studies on transnational adoption regarding Christianity, see Choy’s “Institutionalizing International Adoption: The Historical Origins of Korean Adoption in the United States,” 29-37; Feng’s “Narratives of Transnational Adoption —The Case of *The Language of Blood*,” 422-23; and Hurdis’ “Lifting the Shroud of Silence: A Korean Adoptee’s Search for Truth, Legitimacy, and Justice,” 172-76.

Asians with Christianity, which can be dated back to the 1880s. The work that the missionaries enacted in Korea includes offering medical care, social service and resources, and translation of the Bible, which improved literacy in Korea. The relation between Korea and Christianity was furthered during the Japanese occupation. From 1904 to 1945, Christianity not only was taken as a form of resistance to Japan's imperialism and enforcement of assimilation but also helped Korea in developing democracy and freedom. Moreover, after the Korean War, due to the fact that the media widely spread images of Korea's poor living condition and miseries of war orphans, the U.S. sympathy and ethical concerns for these children's suffering were raised. Through the media, the Korean War orphans were projected on the TV screen and American minds to condemn the evil deeds of the communists. As Rebecca Hurdis points out, the images are to claim "morality of Christian Americans and their desire to aid and protect the Christian culture of South Korea" (175). Under the influence of media and through the assistance of the U.S. missionaries, international adoption of Korean children becomes popular.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Christianity first plays the role of maintaining U.S. social and political superiority in Korea. Then it summons the moral duty of Christian Americans to save the abandoned children of the War. Finally, it fosters the wedding of religion and adoption with the practice of transnational adoption.

American optimism is also one important cultural factor that affects the practice of transnational adoption in the United States. According to Marianne Novy, "Membership in the nation was a matter of citizenship rather than 'blood' would seem to predispose Americans in favor of adoption" (20). Therefore, the national motto, "out of many, one" has always been used to emphasize the nation's ethnic multiplicity

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<sup>4</sup> In her essay, "Lifting the Shroud of Silence: A Korean Adoptee's Search for Truth, Legitimacy, and Justice," Hurdis provides her study on the development of Christianity in Korea. For more details, see Hurdis, 172-76.

(20). In a country that does not stress ethnic purity, adoption is a means of social reform, overcoming the fear of bad blood by encouraging potential parents to offer “good homes” for adoptees. Moreover, adoption, as a symbol of the American belief in choice and freedom, enables the birth mother to have a choice for a new start in life and fulfills adoptive parents’ longing for children. Adoption affirms adoptive parents’ ability to provide a family for children while it also solves the parents’ infertility.<sup>5</sup> However, Americans who celebrate the choice and freedom with transnational adoption are often accused of being ignorant of humanity. The practice of adoption has been under attack for depriving a birth mother’s rights to raise her own children and for the exploitation of women and children when promoting the well-being of the privileged class in a capitalistic society.

Declining birthrate, a steady rate of infertility, the availability of abortions, the civil rights movement, the difficulty for African American parents to adopt, and a changed social attitude toward unwed mothers who choose to keep their children are listed as the reasons why Americans choose to adopt and adopt transnationally.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, the factors that affect Korea’s transnational adoption programs after the Korean War are poverty, patriarchal ideology, social and familial opposition to single-motherhood, and the lack of social welfare.<sup>7</sup> Korea has a history of being a male-dominant society. In this patriarchal society, Confucianism has been dominant with its emphasis on family tradition and filial piety; and it also affects both individual behaviors and family. In such a cultural context, familial honor and dignity

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<sup>5</sup> In her essay, “Transnational Adoption and the ‘Financialization of Everything,’” Trenka holds similar viewpoints, contending that adoption is all about the “freedom” and “choice” of adopters.” See also Novy, *Reading Adoption*, 20-23.

<sup>6</sup> Concerning the reasons why Americans choose to adopt transnationally mentioned above, see Beribetsky’s *Like Our Very Own: Adoption and the Changing Culture of Motherhood, 1851-1950*, and < <http://library.adoption.com/articles/the-case-for-transracial-adoption.html>>

<sup>7</sup> For essays related to Korea’s transnational adoption programs, see Dong Soo Kim’s “A Country Divided: Contextualizing Adoption from a Korean Perspective,” 3-10; Eleana Kim’s “Wedding Citizenship and Culture: Korean Adoptees and the Global Family of Korea,” and Hosu Kim’s “Mothers Without Mothering: Birth Mothers from South Korea Since the Korean War.”

has priority over individual accomplishment and failure. In the Korean society, emphasis on blood ties makes domestic adoption unpopular. The perception that heredity is the major determinant of child development still dominated the Korean society of the 1920s.<sup>8</sup> It is also due to the emphasis on blood ties in the male-dominated society that having a male heir to keep family lines and avoiding “bad” blood become significant. Culturally, bloodlines and pure lineage are of great significance to Korean people; hence “domestic adoption is stigmatized with the shame and illegitimacy of the mother” (Hurdis 177). Politically, “the Korean nation further supported unwed mothers’ illegitimacy by not offering adequate or tangible social welfare structures” (Hurdis 177).

Eleana Kim’s study on Korean adoptees points out that South Korea has the longest history of transnational adoption in the world. The history of Korea as a sending country has in fact existed for more than 50 years and can be traced back to the Korean War (1950-1953). After the War, transnational adoption between Korea and the United States was first legislated by both countries in order to rescue GI babies and war orphans.<sup>9</sup> Between the 1950s and 1970s, there was almost no restriction regarding adopting orphans and abandoned children in South Korea.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Kim observes that wars and their aftermath— poverty, and social upheaval— were causes that pumped international adoption (63). While in the 1950s, Korean mixed-race babies were abandoned due to Confucian ideology of consanguinity, during the 1960s and 1970s, poverty was the main factor that led to the

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<sup>8</sup> See Bong Joo Lee’s “Recent Trends in Child Welfare and Adoption in Korea: Challenges and Future Directions,” 192.

<sup>9</sup> GI babies are babies born in Korea to American servicemen during the Second World War.

<sup>10</sup> Kim cited this from Howard Altstein and Rita Simon’s *Intercountry Adoption: A Multinational Perspective*. In her essay, “The Daughter’s Exchange in Jane Jeong Trenka’s *The Language of Blood*,” Eun Kyung Min notes that many Korean “orphans” were in fact from intact birth families. According to Min, “For reasons ranging from poverty to spousal abuse, the families placed their children in orphanages that proceeded aggressively to put them up for overseas adoption, sometimes even without full consent from their families” (130).

stream of transnational adoptions. In the 1980s, following South Korea's economic development and increasingly disintegrated family and community functions, while the number of babies who were abandoned out of poverty was reduced, unmarried college-age women and teenagers continued to meet the demand in the worldwide adoption economy, especially that of the United States.<sup>11</sup>

The 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul is a turning point for the history of Korean international adoption. While GI babies and women carrying children out of wedlock became visible social problems, international adoption turned into an effective way of getting rid of the shame. However, as Korea considered hosting the Olympics as a symbol of their status as a developed country in the international community, American media report on Korea's ignominy in exporting children became an obstacle, tampering with Korea's effort in improving its international image.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, since the late 1980s, the South Korean government starts to take some measures not only to promote domestic adoption but also to eliminate the stigma as an export country of its own children. These measures helped decrease the number of transnational adoption, but transnational adoption began to boom in the early 1990s again due to economic crisis. According to Eleana Kim, since the 1990s adoption from South Korea has been under the sway of economic fluctuations and concerns about reputation. In 1990, among the 7000 cases of international adoption in the United States, 40 percent of the adoptees were from South Korea. In 2001, South Korea adoptees took 10 percent of international adoptions to the United States, ranking as the third biggest sending country following China and Russia; from 2002 onward, South Korea has been ranking fourth in the world in terms of the number of

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion on Korean birth mothers, see Hosu Kim's "Mothers Without Mothering: Birth Mothers from South Korea Since the Korean War," especially 136-39.

<sup>12</sup> See Eleana Kim's "Wedding Citizenship and Culture: Korean Adoptees and the Global Family of Korea," 64.

children adopted by Americans annually.<sup>13</sup>

In the *Language of Blood*, the author writes about what happened to the adoptees after adoption. The memoir begins with a letter from her birth mother. The letter is full of a birth mother's apology to the adoptee and her gratitude to the adoptive parents. It also tells us the reasons why Trenka was given away: poverty and marital violence. In *A Gesture Life*, the protagonist narrates his disappointment when seeing his adopted daughter for the first time. He is disappointed because of her complexion, which suggests that she is in fact a mixed-blood GI baby. By offering the reader the information of either the birth mother or the adoptee, the two works provide us a connection with the historical context; and by doing so, the two authors deal with the issues derived from the impact of the transnational adoption. These issues will be probed further in the following sections.

### 1.3 Female Bodies and Transnational Adoptions

Transnational adoption is in fact both an individual act and a collective experience. For some people, the practice of transnational adoption is a social policy that deals with social problems, but others consider the practice as a form of exploitation because it links American dreams of nuclear-family-building to the misfortunes of another family. This is to say, a country solves its social problems by sending its children away; and the solution to infertility problem in another country also relies on the displacement of children from their birth families and nations. Hosu Kim argues that the solution is actually a kind of closed transaction. As the practice of privacy that protects the identity of the adoptive family relies on the secrecy,

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<sup>13</sup> For more facts about international adoption, see Dong Soo Kim's "A Country Divided: Contextualizing Adoption from a Korean Perspective," Eleana Kim's "Wedding citizenship and culture: Korean adoptees and the global family of Korea," Eun Kyung Min's "The Daughter's Exchange in Jane Jeong Trenka's *The Language of Blood*," and a chart listing top 20 primary sending countries in 2000 and 2001, see <<http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/FactOverview/international.html>>



confidentiality also becomes important for transnational adoption. The policy of secrecy results in the lack of information about the Korean birth mothers, and it also results in the absence of the birth mother in the databank of the Korean government and in adoptee's life. In order to explore this particular kind of transnational adoption from South Korea to the United States, what follows will highlight the relation between gender and transnational adoption.

A very strong preference for girl adoptees of adoptive families in the United States has been confirmed by both international and domestic adoption agencies. Thus there has been a huge gender discrepancy among the adoptees. On one hand, in the United States, whether the adoptive parents are childless couples or individuals, 70-90 percent of the adoptive parents' gender requests are for girls. The preference for girls is also true for adoptive parents of all races, socioeconomic statuses, and ages. 52 percent of the children awaiting placement in U.S. foster care are boys. Moreover, from 1971 to 2001, 64 percent of the children adopted from U.S. foster care were girls, while only 36 percent were boys. On the other hand, during 1954 to 2000, approximately 58 percent abandoned children in Korea were girls.<sup>14</sup> Drawing on Dong Soo Kim's study on Korean-American adoption, Lois Lydens points out that the gender imbalance comes with the correspondence between Korean cultural preference for male children and the preference of many American parents to adopt girls.<sup>15</sup>

As the gender preference is an important factor that causes gender imbalance, it is important to understand what is behind the specific gender preference. There are several reasons to explain why many adoptive parents prefer girls. According to Christine Adamec and William Pierce, to adoptive parents, girls are perceived as more

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<sup>14</sup> See Ingender, <<http://www.in-gender.com/Help/About.aspx>>

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed study on gender preference, see Christine and William L. Pierce's *The Encyclopedia of Adoption*. New York: Facts on File, 1991. The study on gender preference in this book is quoted on Adoption.com, see <<http://encyclopedia.adoption.com/entry/gender-preference/150/1.html>>

acceptive of parental discipline than boys, and adoptive parents tend to have an unrealistic image of an obedient little girl. Usually adoptive parents prefer to have an easier way in raising a child. The study shows that in potential adoptive parents' perspectives, boys are often perceived as being more aggressive and easier to get into trouble, and girls, by contrast, appeal to the protective and altruistic side of people who want to adopt. In addition, adoptive parents expect girls to have more affective connection with them and to stay closer to the family even after the adoptees grow up and get married. Finally, the gender disparity in adoption may also stem from the expectation that an adopted girl would have less difficulties in blending into American society than a boy.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, with an emphasis on biological ties, in the male-dominant society of Korea, the high percentage of abandoned female children results from the gender ideology in which male children are preferred in the patrilineal system. This kind of patriarchal society also gives low credit to single motherhood and domestic adoption.

The gender of the adoptees is not the only issue that is involved in the gendered dynamics within transnational adoption. In fact, the socially constructed gender role of the parents in both sending and receiving countries is also inevitably significant in transnational adoption. Transnational adoption is a highly feminized social practice. Birth fathers and adoptive fathers are marginalized. According to Wadia-Ellis,

Adoption, like motherhood has always been a women's issue. It is women who give birth and women who have had their birth children taken from them because of cultural, political, or economic forces; and it is women who sometimes feel they must relinquish their birth child in order to protect that

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<sup>16</sup> For a detailed discussion on gender preference, see Christine Adamec and William Pierce's *The Encyclopedia of Adoption*, NY: Facts on File, 1991. See <<http://encyclopedia.adoption.com/entry/gender-preference/150/1.html>>

child. It is also predominantly women who choose or agree to take on the work of mothering another woman's child as her own. And it is primarily women, adopted as infants or children, and birth mothers, who have created networks across North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand that support adoptees and birth mothers as they search for one another. And finally, women are at the fore lobbying for legislation that will enable all adoptees access to their birth records. (ix)

Both birth parents and adoptive parents are under the sway of social stereotypes and expectation. Both men and women face the difficulties in living up to socially prescribed gender roles.<sup>17</sup> While the accusation of immoral sexual behavior has been laid onto the birth mother in Korea, infertility and childlessness has long been defined as a female problem.<sup>18</sup>

With regard to the relation between gender and transnational adoption in the United States, transnational adoption actually results from many factors: a declining birthrate, birth control, availability of legal abortion, a changed social attitude toward unwed mothers who choose to parent their children and growing social/cultural support for single motherhood.

Furthermore, motherhood in American ideology is also related to transnational adoption. According to Nancy Riley, in the United States, motherhood is still "a central part of women's lives and identity" (93). As Riley observes, in the U.S., the presumption of appropriate gender behavior for women is motherhood. Even if women have other roles in the labor market, they are expected to be mothers, to want to be mothers, to enjoy that role and to find fulfillment through their family roles.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Freeark et al., especially 87-98.

<sup>18</sup> Amy E. Traver offers a study on gender and international adoption, including gender forces in both receiving and sending countries, see <[http://www.socwomen.org/fall08\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf](http://www.socwomen.org/fall08_fact_sheet.pdf)>

<sup>19</sup> In her essay, "American Adoptions of Chinese Girls: The Socio-Political Matrices of Individual Decisions," Riley quotes Jean O'Barr, Deborah Pope and Mary Weyer's anthology, *Ties That Bind:*

Based on the significance of motherhood in American ideology, Riley further argues that the concept that all women need to be mothers, and they need their children as much as their children need them is the basis of the ideology of motherhood in the United States. Women are in fact compelled to be mothers (94). Thus, motherhood is socially prescribed to American women, and for women who can not bear their own children, transnational adoption becomes a ready solution when white healthy babies are no longer available for adoption.

Meanwhile, as American women are required to be mothers, the gendered middle-class ideology is another factor that facilitates American transnational adoption. According to Ann Anagnost, with their improved social status, American women frequently link motherhood to self-completion (392). They not only celebrate the freedom and choice with transnational adoption, but also engage themselves in a classed relationship with their children's birth mothers. As Sarah Dorow points out in her book, *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship*, in transnational adoption a comparison between the plight of orphan girls in patriarchal societies and their potential in the feminist West is often made to demonstrate the well-being and freedom of the privileged (190). Transnational adoptions turn out to be a product of the gender and class ideologies in the United States.<sup>20</sup> Either for childless women or for women who are unable to bear children in U.S., the practice becomes an alternative other than having a biological child when they have difficulties in meeting the social expectation of their gender role.

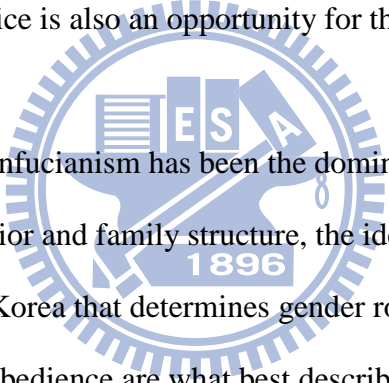
When social norm has a great influence on individuals, women are not only expected to fit the U.S. ideology of motherhood, but also get criticized if they do not.

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*Essays on Mothering and Patriarchy*, and illustrates Carolyn Morell's *Unwomanly Conduct: the Challenges of Intentional Childlessness* to describe the relation between motherhood and adoption.

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed discussion on gender and the receiving nation in transnational adoption, see <[http://www.socwomen.org/fall08\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf](http://www.socwomen.org/fall08_fact_sheet.pdf)>

Riley argues that women are often scorned and considered selfish and less mature if they choose not to be mothers, and “if their childlessness is involuntary, they are often pitied” (94). On one hand, the society does not tolerate women who do not fulfill their “responsibility” of giving birth to children. On the other, when women have difficulties in fulfilling the responsibility, people impose their compassion on them. Thus the ideology of motherhood outlines what makes a woman and makes childless women become objects of compassion. Barbara Rothman designates motherhood as an “intimate, joyous, terrifying, life-affirming” identity (23). However, it is also this very concept of motherhood that brings criticism against childless women. Therefore, as transnational adoption is a socially acceptable option for childless women to become “normal,” the practice is also an opportunity for them to fit in their gender role as a mother.



In Korea, while Confucianism has been the dominant philosophy that dictates acceptable individual behavior and family structure, the ideology is also the cultural and national foundation of Korea that determines gender roles for Korean women. Male supremacy and filial obedience are what best describe the cultural identity of Korea. In her essay, “Re-membering the Korean Military Comfort Women” Hyunah Yang observes that in Confucian ideology, there is a double standard of sexual conduct. Women are expected to be chaste, and the ideal of chastity applies only to women. While women’s sexuality does not belong to themselves, women’s relationship to men and men’s willingness to possess them define women’s virtues. Also, in her essay, “Lifting the Shroud of Silence: A Korean Adoptee’s Search for Truth, Legitimacy, and Justice,” Rebecca Hurdis points out that it is through the exploitation “of women’s sexuality that men’s respect and dignity are safeguarded. The women who did not adhere to ideologies of Confucianism were socially and politically rejected, oftentimes leaving behind a trail of shamed mothers and unwanted

children” (176). The ideal of chastity not only regulates women’s behavior and sexuality but also helps form a double standard of sexuality. A violation against the ideal of chastity would bring social stigma.

In Korea’s official databank, there has been little information concerning birth mothers. According to Hosu Kim, on adoptees’ birth certificates, birth parents’ names are replaced with adoptive parents’. Transnational adoptions are in fact closed transactions due to the policy of secrecy, as mentioned before. Three figures have been identified as representatives of the birth mothers in the literary representation of Korea’s international adoption. They are military prostitutes, low-paying factory female workers, and runaway teenagers. The first category refers to women who have illicit sexual conducts with foreigners and also who are usually birth mothers of biracial children. These women carry both a woman’s shame and Korea’s national shame by violating the code of women’s virtues. The second category includes women who helped South Korea’s rapid economic growth with their productive labor in the 1970s and 1980s. They suffer unbearable working condition, limited income, and unplanned pregnancies. These women produce not only commodities but also babies for adoption. The third category refers to troubled teenage girls who are not ready to be mothers. Mostly, they do not have family or social supports to raise their babies.

In addition, Hosu Kim suggests another category of birth mothers: married women who give up children because of extremely poor living condition. Indeed, married women who gave up their children out of poverty or domestic violence are also the main reason for the boom of international adoption in Korea. These women have always been neglected from mainstream narratives because their experiences do not correspond to the stereotype of birth mothers. They are not prostitutes themselves,

nor are they single unwed mothers.<sup>21</sup> Due to the traumatic past in the nation's history and the pervasive stereotype and social stigma of birth parents, these birth mothers were neglected, and thus become absent in official documents and the memory of the Koreans.

#### 1.4 An Overview of Researches on Adoption Narratives

In the introduction of *Imagining Adoption*, Marianne Novy points out three mythic stories of imagining adoption that pervade European and American cultures. They are “the disastrous adoption and discovery, as in *Oedipus*, the happy discovery, as in *Winter's Tale*, and the happy adoption” (1). These plots prompt us to think about the nature of family and the self. On one hand, “adoption plots dramatize cultural tensions about definitions of family and the importance of heredity” (Novy 2). Through these imaginations about adoption, we get to realize how our society constructs the concept of kinship. These representations of adoption are also responsible for the understanding of the relations among the adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents. However, with these representations of adoption comes also the stereotype of imaging adoption. As Novy proposes, how adoption is represented in literature and media affects how people think about adoption; and the way literary works represent the experience might be shaped in part by the cultural images of adoption that are commonly known. Hence, the representation and the social/cultural backdrop are mutually constructing each other. The examination of adoption narratives not only enable a reflection on how we imagine adoption but also help to develop more inclusive and open perspectives when trying to understand adoption.

Besides, in the wake of an increasing number of transnational adoptions

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<sup>21</sup> For a detailed study on birth mothers from South Korea, see Hosu Kim's “Mothers Without Mothering: Birth Mothers from South Korea Since the Korean War,” 139-41.

during 1980 to 2003, more and more narratives about transnational or transracial adoption appear. The complexities of transnational adoption process, the emotional turbulence of adoptees, the competence of adoptive parents in raising children of different races, the bewilderment of adoptees about their identities, the quest for the self, and the experience of searching for birth mothers have drawn a lot of attention and become public concerns. More and more people, including adoptees, adoptive parents, social workers, facilitators, and officials, write about the narratives of transnational adoption. Sara Dorow points out that “the stories and activities that happen between adopted children and the people around them constitute what Hall (1996a) calls *identification*” (26). According to Dorow, “identification” is a process which happens between “individual psyches and the subject positions invented by culture, politics, and markets” (27). Narratives of adoptees and narratives told by people around them are the “the identificatory work between individual and collective, local and transnational, past and present” (27). Adoption narratives, comingling personal experience and cultural ideology, became the intersection of the private and the public as they often deal with individuals and the society at the same time.

In addition to the process of identification in transnational adoption narratives, Margaret Homans’s essay, “Adoption Narratives, Traume, and Origins,” links adoption narratives with narrative theories and trauma theories. In the essay, Homans explains that Western cultures “tend to equate biological origins with identity” (5). In narratives such as *Oedipus* or *Harry Potter*, taking root trips seems to be necessary for adoptees to know both the origin and who they really are. However, these trips are often followed by disappointment because these searches can not lead to what they want: knowledge of who they are. Adoption narratives hence are often a process of approaching “an irretrievable past,” and a process of “making an origin” (7). It tends to create “plausible if not verifiable narratives” (7). In other words, the



identity narratives not only tell the experience of the adoptees but also invent the adoption story in a particular way because in the storytelling the adoptees often deals with the past and the present at the same time. To understand the social context of transnational adoption, thus, becomes imperative in analyzing transnational adoption narratives.

In fact, the scope of adoption history and practice appears comprehensive. The study of transnational adoption and transnational adoption narratives crosses disciplinary lines to include anthropology, history, politics, psychology, and social work. However, in *Imagining Adoption*, a collection of essays, which studies representations of adoption in different media, such as films, plays, poetics, adoption rhetoric and novels, there is a common concern about adoptees' identity. Some argue that identity is primarily biological; others support the idea that heredity and nurture are equally important. Some consider adoption as a personal and social good; others maintain that adoption is viewing adoptees as commodities within international power structure. As Marianne Novy concludes in her introduction of the anthology, "the techniques of literature and of literary and cultural analysis facilitate exploring its complexity" (12). Only with the examination of the strands of difference that characterize the adoptee and the story will we get to realize that the different experiences in adoption. Experiences of transnational adoption are multiple, divergent and unique. These experiences can not be generalized because every story is unique. The value of these narratives is of unwavering significance because the representations involve identification, and it includes a reflection of social imagination of transnational adoption. Transnational adoption narratives are important also because we know that there is always more than what is said in the stories. The experiences of adoptees can never be encapsulated in a single text. Neither can these representations be comprehensive of the aspects involved in the issue of transnational

adoption. The practice of transnational adoption is closely connected to politics, social issues, and cultural contexts. It is also about the life of individuals. However, as the range of the study is extensive and inclusive, what are presented here are but a few of the most significant works on transnational adoption narratives. To study the representation in the two texts, it is necessary to consider the psychological, cultural, racial, and social contexts within which they are conceived.

### 1.5 Contextualizing *The Language of Blood* and *A Gesture Life*

In her study on adoption narratives, Margaret Homans argues that “adoptive origins and origin stories are not discovered in the past so much as they are created in the present and for the present” (5). Likewise, Thomas King also says that “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2). The truth about “exactly who I am” is a constant question hovering over adoptees’ mind. Hence, as knowing the origin or heredity is often linked to one’s identity, root trips become necessary to adoptees. On one hand, the presence of the adoptees and their trips unsettle the amnesia of Korea. On the other, however, as Hosu Kim suggests, in the dominant narratives surrounding returning adoptees in Korea, birth mothers are often generalized as they are all the same. Through the representation of media, adoption becomes the affect economy. Birth mothers are made into “the affective figure, encapsulated in a dominant narrative of adoptees as successful citizens and of foreign adoption as being unfortunate, but inevitably necessary” (143).<sup>22</sup> Women were exploited in the patriarchic society during the World War II and when Korea became industrialized. With this dominant narrative in Korea, they are exploited again as “affectively

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<sup>22</sup> Kim argues that “the affect economy connects the traumatic losses of birth mothers with the adoptive parent’s desire for a child (often thwarted due to infertility). Increasingly, the figure of the birth mother is deployed as an affective pull, producing the adoptee’s desire to return to the motherland...” (145).

necessary labor' that ensures a successful adoption" when their children become political tools bridging Korea to the United States and global economy.<sup>23</sup>

In transnational adoption, both birth mothers and adoptees become objects of pity. According to Eleana Kim, Korean adoptees feel "discrimination from Americans and rejection both from South Koreans and Korean Americans" (70); therefore, they do not have the sense of belonging. Koreanness becomes a national, political, and cultural discourse interpellating adult adoptees into a productive role in global economy, and the adoptees become "reminders and remainders of South Korea's Third World past, the 'illicit' sexual practices of Korean Women, and American cultural and economic imperialism" (72). Both the adoptee and the adoptive mothers are the specters of a repressed history. They are conveniently erased from Korea's official documents, easily forgotten.

Jane Jeong Trenka was born in early 1970s, when South Korea emphasized economic growth rather than the development of social welfare after the Korea War. Sending children to another country for adoption is also one of the Korean government's strategies in dealing with social problems of poverty. As discussed earlier, in both Korea and the United States, the international adoption narrative has appealed to an affective relation between both birth and adoptive parents. While in Korea's adoption discourse, birth parents were socially, legally, or psychologically forced to give up their children with an expectation of a better life for both the children and parents; in U.S. adoption discourse, adoptees are viewed as gifts from birth mothers. To Trenka, she does not see her experience resembling what was told in master transnational adoption narrative. She writes *The Language of Blood* because she feels the need to tell her story in her own voice. In her essay "Why Write," she

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<sup>23</sup> "Affectively necessary labor" was a term that Hosu Kim quotes from Michael Hardt's "Affective Labor." Affectively necessary labor is the labor that is essential to produce affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion.

said,

People always ask me why I write. Here's why: I write because the story I have to tell about my life is not the same story that I have been told. I write because I want to create a small mark on the historical record. I write because the master narrative is a master. I write because I refuse to be deployed to support someone else's agenda. I write to find the truth. I write so you will believe me. I write to remember who I am. I write to remember who my mother was. If my childhood memory is a site of amnesia, then I will make my adult memory a site of resistance. I will remember, I will remember, I will remember. I write, I resist, and I refuse to be erased.<sup>24</sup>

In transnational adoption discourses, adoption becomes affect economy. However, divergent voices come out from adoptees when the adoptees find their experiences diverge from dominant narratives and from the rhetoric of “the best interests for children.” For Trenka, to write is to resist being generalized and erased.

*A Gesture Life* represents another dimension of post-adoption narrative. The context of the transnational adoption narrative in *A Gesture Life* is located in the first wave of Korea's foreign adoption, in which biracial children are the majority of the children given up for adoption. Korea had been occupied and annexed by Japan since 1910. The adoptive father, Kurohata, or Doc Hata, is also an adoptee who was brought from Korea to Japan before the World War II. It was a period of time when Korea was under Japan's occupation. In fact, it is very unusual for a Japanese family to adopt a Korean child; therefore, as Chang-rae Lee says, Hata is “a part of a family that he could never belong to and be a part of.”<sup>25</sup> Wherever he is, Hata always makes

<sup>24</sup> Trenka puts this paragraph on a conducive blog. See < <http://www.wrestlingtheangel.com/archives/000556.html>>.

<sup>25</sup> In answering the question “How common is it, or was it, for a Japanese family to adopt a Korean child,” Chang-rae Lee draws on his own study and make a comment which includes the information about Doc Hata. For Lee's answer, which I will discuss in the third chapter, see <

great efforts to try to belong. The desire to be part of his environment drives him to join the army during the World War II. In his service, he meets a comfort woman from Korea, K. Hata, who develops a romantic love for K. However, in the end, K was murdered by other Japanese soldiers. As Chang-rae Lee said in an interview, Hata's relationship with the comfort woman is one of the defining events in Doc Hata's life. After the War, he moved to the United States and adopted a daughter, Sunny. Being a Korean orphan and mix-raced, as Lee says, Sunny is "taken in by a family or an adult who is not really thinking of her as a person, but as someone to fill out the house."<sup>26</sup> With the narrator's retrospect to the conflicts between the adoptive father and the adoptee, the novel prompts an inspection of the "best interest for children."

Without emphasizing humanitarianism, love, generosity, rescue narrative, the social benefit for children, and morality in the practice of transnational adoption, *The Language of Blood* and *A Gesture Life* present counter narratives to dominant transnational adoption narratives. The practice is no longer a blessing for both parents and adoptees. My thesis therefore intends to explore the nature of transnational adoption discourses, and study the representations of transnational adoption in these two texts.

In the next chapter, I attempt to investigate Trenka's representation of her experiences as a transnational adoptee. Her memoir challenges the master transnational adoption narrative constructed by agencies and adoptive parents. First, I will discuss the dominant discourse in transnational adoption. Discourses about the binary opposition between the sending country and the receiving country have normalized the practice of transnational adoption. While social workers and

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<http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/poems/a.gesture.life.html>.

<sup>26</sup> For the comment, see <<http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/poems/a.gesture.life.html>>.

facilitators become experts and knowledge producers of transnational adoption, the continuation of the practice is in fact supported by the reiteration of these discourses. Following this, I proceed to study the representation of transnational adoption in Trenka's memoir. As Marianne Novy observes, adoption plots have been made into films, plays and novels. Adoption plots also appear in TV series like *The Simpsons*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Sex and the City*. As transnational adoption becomes normalized, in Trenka's memoir, with the inclusion of playwriting, crossword puzzles, myths and dream sequences, it reveals an adoptee's desire to combine these different genres to construct an adoption plot in her own perspective. The presentation challenges the representation of master narrative and enables us to rethink the practice of transnational practice. I will also examine the migration of the female body under the practice of transnational adoption in the memoir. Gender dynamics in both sending and receiving countries is deeply involved within the process of transnational adoption, and gender ideologies in different societies have defined what women are. Being stripped of her own culture and being displaced far away from her own race, Trenka, as a Korean female adoptee, has witnessed what has happened to both her adoptive and birth mothers. And she refuses to repeat their life stories.

In the third chapter, I will analyze the presentation of the transnational adoption narrative in *A Gesture Life*. I intend to study Doc Hata as an adoptee. Belongingness has always been an important issue for him. For Hata, there is always a great yearning to belong: in Japan, in the military, and in his home in Bedley Run, America. The way that his language of successful assimilation in his narration and his gesture of being the number one citizen in the little town in America both reveal the fact that he can never possibly really be part of the American society. The representation of Hata enables us to consider the experience of an adoptee after the practice of transnational adoption leaves him with little or no respect for where he was

from. Following this, I will delve into the relation between Hata and his adoptive daughter, Sunny. Oscillating between the past and the present, Hata's narration discloses how his yearning for belongingness has driven him to adopt a daughter. As the relation between an adoptive parent and the adoptee deteriorates since the adoptive father refuses to regard his daughter as a person, the narrative suggests a reconsideration of the nature of transnational adoption. Finally, through the examination of the novel, in the end of the third chapter I will focus on analyzing the relation between gender politics and transnational adoption. Hata's expectation for women's chastity, first in K, then in Sunny, reveals the gender ideology he has ascribed to. The way that Hata tries to have a family by adopting a Korean girl mirrors the exploitation of female bodies in the case of the comfort women. The gender ideology drives Hata to subjugate and control the female adoptee, and turns the female adoptee into a victim of patriarchy.

Experiences of transnational adoption can never be generalized. Likewise, the practice is never the only solution to social problems and family issues. Through the study of the representation in the two transnational adoption narratives, I argue that to accept the rhetoric of rescue, humanitarianism, love and generosity in transnational adoption without considering the loss of family, culture, and language for an adoptee is in fact a reproduction of the "banality of evil" because it is the reiteration of the discourses that support the continuation of the practice.<sup>27</sup> The language of "rescue" is hierarchical and dangerous because it assumes that there is a culture that is inferior or under-developed and thus must be rescued. Korean American adoption is a tale of racial and gender woe. We can not ignore the gender politics

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<sup>27</sup> Banality of evil is a phrase coined by Hannah Arendt. The phrase is incorporated in the title of her work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* and describes the thesis that the great evils in history generally, and the Holocaust in particular, are not executed by fanatics or sociopaths but rather by ordinary people who accept the premises of their state and therefore participated with the view that their actions are normal.

within the practice of transnational adoption. Nor can we neglect the lucrative profit accumulated through the migration of the children in the world of global capitalism. The representations of transnational adoption in the two books debunk the myth of “happily ever after” in the master transnational adoption narrative. Therefore, in the end of the thesis, I would also argue that to support transnational adoption without reducing the need of transnational adoption, eliminating monetary incentives, and effecting real social changes is to support the extension of the exploitation created by patriarchy, racism, and imperialism.





## Chapter Two

### Debunking the Master Narrative of Transnational Adoption in

#### *The Language of Blood*

There are so many books written by adoptive parents in first person, the narrator being the adoptee. My book is actually from the adoptee's perspective, which may not seem all that big of a deal to someone who isn't completely obsessed with adoption, but it is true that white adoptive parents and social workers have dominated the literature of adoption for fifty years. We desperately need more adoptees, of any opinion, to write and publish just to begin to correct this imbalance. It's imperative that we speak for ourselves in our adult voices.<sup>28</sup>

~Jane Jeong Trenka

In this chapter, I intend to explore how Trenka, as a transnational adoptee, challenges the master narrative of transnational adoption with her own lived experience. I will also analyze Trenka's criticism of the idealized version of transnational adoption as represented in the master narrative, which, according to Trenka, is not reality but most possibly a fantasy constructed based on class, patriarchy, racial ideology. I attempt to study Trenka's critique from three aspects. First, I will explore the nature of the master narrative of transnational adoption. The master narrative has been relying on the description of the polarities between sending and receiving countries for more than fifty years. And according to Trenka's memoir, there is a discrepancy between what is told by transnational adoption agencies and adopters and the reality that transnational adoptees face in their real life. Hence, there is a need to rethink the nature of the practice. I will also study Trenka's ambivalence toward her identity and then examine her choice to represent her experience in

<sup>28</sup> See <<http://www.waterstonereview.com/pdf/7/JaneJeongTrenkainterview.pdf>>

divergent genres in the memoir. The employment of multiple genres embodies her struggle of identification. To Trenka, the memoir is a record of her experience of transformation, in which she has transformed from an adoptee who suffers from a fragmented identity into a person who has freed herself from the trauma and is reborn through her own writing. Furthermore, Trenka's use of bodily symbols will also be analyzed.

To investigate how Trenka represents her own experience, I will begin with Trenka's wish to speak as an adoptee. In *The Language of Blood*, Trenka writes herself into different characters: such as a doll which can be "returned" back to the store; a replacement of the "pink-skinned boy" with blue eyes and funny smile yet who has never been conceived; the rabbit "sitting right at the hunter's feet" that has to remain perfectly still, or her stalker would find her; "a gook, a chink" in a white man's society; a puppy that is eager to please her white parents but finds herself never good enough; the dragon which has never been accepted.<sup>29</sup> This way of representation reflects her fragmented self and her sense of bewilderedness as an adoptee. Also, one of the focuses in *The Language of Blood* is the relationship between the adoptee and the adopter. To question the language in the master narrative of transnational adoption, Trenka dwells on the tension between people's imagination of transnational adoption and the reality faced by the adoptees. To Trenka, her adoptive parents do not see her as who she is, so in the sense that Trenka is a replacement of the white baby desired by her parents yet who has never been conceived, she is invisible/ absent in the adoptive family.

Paradoxically, Trenka is also overly present to the adoptive parents as a reminder of their inability to bear their own children. As religious Lutherans, Trenka's

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<sup>29</sup> For the reference of "pink-skinned boy," see page 28. For the reference of "sitting right at the hunter's feet," see page 81. For the reference of "a gook, a chink," see page 83.

adoptive parents follow Pastor Mattson’s advice — “God does not see the color of our skin,” and “He made us all the same in His image” — and adopt Trenka and her sister (25). The Brauers raise the sisters as if they were their own children. However, the adopters deliberately ignore the difference between them and their adoptive daughters. Furthermore, they also ignore Trenka’s need for family support. When Trenka’s adoptive mother tries to sanitize the emotions out of Trenka, what follows after the sanitization is the adoptee’s “han” (恨/한)—an emotion consists of resentment, grudges, regret, angst, and grief (Lo 169). Trenka undergoes the experience of being unrecognized as who she is and suffers the emotional turbulence of “han.” Moreover, what frustrates her the most is that none of her experience resembles what is told in the master narrative of transnational adoption. In this regard, the disparity between the ideal version of transnational adoption as represented in the master narrative and the everyday reality for the adoptees is a recurring motif in *The Language of Blood*. Hence in what follows, I will first start with a study on the master narrative in order to further explore the contrast between the perfect image of a nuclear family as presented in the master narrative and the adoptee’s “real” life as represented in Trenka’s memoir.

## 2.1 Accessing the Dominant Narrative of Transnational Adoption

I will start with the ideological discourses underlying the dominant narrative of transnational adoption, which includes gift rhetoric, rescue narratives, and humanitarianism. According to studies on Korean American adoption, the practice links the expectation for building the loving middle-class nuclear family in Western society to the value of pure lineage and the ideal of feminine chastity in the patriarchal society of Korea. It is also conceived as a repercussion of American imperialism/colonialism and Korea’s aspiration for economic growth and modernity

after the Korea War.<sup>30</sup> Whereas in the United States adopting a foreign baby is an exercise of American assimilation in the name of rescue, sending children away from Korea is often read as a maternal sacrifice for a better life for both the child and the birth family in Korea. Moreover, when the “gift rhetoric” of adoption in the United States meets the notion of the American dream in Korea,<sup>31</sup> the practice is also a means to fulfill Christian ideal of civilization and a reflection of Korea’s ingrained misogyny.<sup>32</sup> The binary oppositions between the sending and receiving countries such as supply and need, repression in patriarchal society and freedom in liberal democracy, traditional and modern, started Korean-American adoption. However, it is the reiteration of the binary oppositions that sustains the practice.

Transnational adoption discourse and narrative articulated by adoption agencies and adoptive parents has dominated the literature of transnational adoption for more than fifty years. It is until very recent years that we hear the voices of birth parents and adoptees. For the past five decades, while birth parents were mostly absent in government documents and the articulation of adult adoptees remained largely unheard, both adoption agencies and adopters have assumed the responsibility to speak for the practice of transnational adoption.

On the one hand, adoption agencies have been the “knowledge producers” on the subject of Korean-American adoption. According to Kristi Brian, three themes in the discourse of transnational agency characterize the language of these knowledge producers: “adopter-centered,” “culture-consuming,” and the tendency of treating the sending country, Korea, as “nonpolitical, cultural other” (62). In her essay “Choosing

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<sup>30</sup> For the relation between transnational adoption and the imperialism of the United States, see Tobias Hübinette. For the relation between transnational adoption and the aspirations for modernity in Korea, see Hosu Kim, and Eleana Kim.

<sup>31</sup> The gift rhetoric views the child as a gift of birth mothers. In intercountry adoption sites where the U.S. has been the dominant receiving country, the American dream refers to a promise of a better life for the adopted child. See Hosu Kim, 145-47.

<sup>32</sup> For a detailed discussion on each notion mentioned above, see Kristi Brian, David Eng, Dong Soo Kim, Hosu Kim, Tobias Hübinette, Eleana Kim, Catherine Cerniza Choy.

Korea: Marketing ‘Multiculturalism’ to Choosy Adopters,” Brian argues that in order to meet “the consumer needs of the target market,” which are the needs of adopters in the enterprise of transnational adoption, Korean-American adoption social workers often take the stance as experienced adopters and understanding, sensitive facilitators to guarantee a successful adoption (65). In the discourse of the agencies, U.S. domestic adoptions are more often than not overlooked in the information provided to potential adopters. In addition, the efficiency of Korean-American adoption is often a focus in the discourse of agency facilitators when they intend to promote transnational adoption. Thus, the practice overshadows other options for potential parents. E. J. Graff’s essay, “The Lie We Love,” corresponds to Kristi Brian’s points as she indicates that transnational adoption is promoted by adoption agencies because, in addition to religious belief and changes of demography,<sup>33</sup> the practice is also considered as a “safer,” “more predictable and more likely to success” plan than domestic adoptions for those who are eager to adopt.

According to Brian, the agency facilitators of Korean American adoption also tend to link multiculturalism with the race awareness of adopters. In fact, the notion of multiculturalism is hailed in the United States and thus the race consciousness of the adopters is viewed as the embodiment of virtuosity and open-mindedness (Brian 70). In Brian’s words, with the offhand uses of culture and multiculturalism, culture is mostly reduced to race or traditions, and adoptees are viewed as carriers of culture or cultural commodities. Thus, race, or culture, becomes a guide to the adopters’ preference in their decision-making process.<sup>34</sup> However, as the United States embraces its ethnic plurality and uses the image of a melting pot as the national

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<sup>33</sup> In Graff’s essay, the changes of demography here refer to the declination of the number of the unplanned births, which is a result of contraception, abortion, delayed marriages. Reasons for transnational adoption that are related to the changes of demography can also be found on page 6 and 12 of this thesis.

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed discussion on the assumption of race consciousness in culture-consuming parents in the discourse of adoption agencies, see Kristi Brian, 69-74.

emblem, the notion of unity through diversity and the acclaim of multiculturalism not only highlight abiding ethnic differences, neglect socially shared interests but also lead to a dichotomy between sending and receiving countries, between western and eastern cultures, and between white people and peoples of color.

Finally, agencies intend to create a fixed image of Korea as “unanimously and culturally intolerant of adoption” (Brian 69). Brian suggests that in the discourse of transnational adoption agencies, Korea is a country with a bound tradition. The assumed tradition is often associated with patriarchy and gender hierarchies. And it is also a tradition that supposedly hampers the development of modernity and democracy in Korea. In this perspective, Brian points out, without giving “careful reconsideration to how tradition is differently constructed at particular historical moments,” without portraying the relations among Korean-American adoption, its profitable program, Korea’s rapid industrialization and urbanization, and Americans’ reasons for adopting Korean children, and without contextualizing the diverse opinions for adoption in Korea, the practice often becomes “the best solution for a society crippled by its own traditions” in the dominant discourse of transnational adoption (68). Instead of “relying on the lazy language of tradition,” or on the polarities between sending and receiving countries, the practice of Korean-American adoption does indeed entail a rethinking on its nature (69). And an expectation for a real social change that focalizes on social welfare is, therefore, of imperative significance.

Besides adoption agencies, whose discourses dominate adoption narratives, adoptive parents and many western researchers are also speaking on behalf of the prevailing narratives that have illustrated and affected the practice of transnational adoption for a long time. Among them, international adoption guides written by adopters often provide information of the adoption process to adopters. In her essay,

“Shopping for Children in the International Marketplace,” Kim Park Nelson points out that a hierarchy of parents and children is omnipresent in these works of “how-to” literature. Aside from the hierarchy of white parents and colored children, in the adopters’ preference, there are also a racial hierarchy of the adoptees of different colors with white children on top and colored children on the bottom and a national hierarchy with adoptive parents’ nations on top and the Third World countries on the bottom. Moreover, class hierarchy between adopters and low-class birth parents of color also exists in their language. In other words, language of hierarchy and racism lurks in many adoption narratives as represented by these international adoption guides. Nelson also indicates that the “power differentials between parents and children, institutions and individuals, white people and people of color, and rich and poor nations are great enough that potential for abuse is enormous” (90). The language of the international adoption guides not only allow adopters to view themselves as superior and more qualified in the experience of parenting than birth parents, but also consent the act of reproducing white privileges through transnational adoption.

Furthermore, some of the adoptive parents and adoption agency workers take a step further to assume the role of adoption “experts” or “authorities.” Sunny Jo points out that there has been an imbalance in terms of the consideration of transnational adoption. On one hand, according to Jo, the “adoption professionals,” “supposed authorities” or “experts” assume that “the affluent white couples in the ‘First World’” provide loving homes, opportunities for education and a “good” life for poor, starving, and needy children (286). Over the past fifty years, social workers, psychiatrists, white adoptive parents, and academics have dominated the literature on transnational adoption and therefore have been the ones who describe and define “what it’s like” and “how the adoptees turn out” to be like (Oparah et al. 1). On the

other, based on the fact that the voices of adult adoptees remain largely unheard, when adult adoptees question the assumption in the master narrative, their articulation is often considered as individual or personal and therefore not as “credible” as that of the “experts.” In this regard, Jo defines the situation when “someone becomes the expert on other people’s experiences and is deemed more knowledgeable about who they are than the people themselves” as an act of “appropriation” (286). In the appeals of transnational adoption agencies to potential parents, there is often an emphasis on providing children a home to “rescue” them from miserable situations. In the words of the “experts,” children are “saved” and the practice of transnational adoption is beneficial for children, parents, and society as a whole (286). However, if we think about how “the need to adopt” is created by western social expectations for building a middle class nuclear family, about the stark gender role which continues to reaffirm the importance of motherhood for women and thus forms the incentive to adopt from sending countries, about the financial accumulation that supports the practice of transnational adoption agencies, and about how government shirks its responsibility of maintaining social welfare and thus gives private agencies opportunities to develop without regulations, what the rhetoric of “the best interests for children” really means in the dominant narrative of transnational adoption becomes essentially problematic.

In addition to the discourses and narratives of transnational adoption, Shihning Chou, Kevin Browne, and Melanie Kirkaldy also point out in their essay, “Intercountry Adoption on the Internet,” that 37 percent of registered American intercountry adoption websites clearly affirm that their programs allow adopters to select a child they wish to adopt. Kristi Brian holds the same conclusion in her study. According to Brian, while many adopters are looking forward to a predictable and controlled process of family-building, adoption agencies often attempt to cater to the “choosiness” of potential adoptive parents (66). Therefore, the agencies turn



transnational adoption into a practice that is “congruent with other processes of globalization that favor ‘private sector solutions over the public sector’” (66). Chou, Browne, and Kirkaldy also indicate that the majority of intercountry adoption agencies displayed photographs of children on websites, and 18.1 percent of agencies used terminology that views children no longer as individuals in need but as commodity items (22). In this regard, the discourse and terminologies used by transnational adoption agencies create an illusion that transnational adoption has been all about freedom and choice of adopters; and the rhetoric of “rescue” and “save” creates another illusion that turns the practice of transnational adoption into an inevitable result of war and poverty in the dominant narrative of transnational adoption.

Critics on the practice of transnational adoption have different ideas about the nature of transnational adoption. The act of taking the children away from their birth country are defined as either altruism or exploitation, either humanitarianism or consumption. Some argue that adoptive parents and adoptees are mutually produced for each other in transnational adoption, and that adoption is seen as a personal and social good; others disapprove the commodification of children and of kinship. However, all critics condemn South Korea’s act of exporting children for adoption after the Korean War. North Korea, which took a different measure in dealing with the same crisis after the Korean War, criticized South Korea for sending children away permanently.<sup>35</sup> International community also attacked South Korea for exporting its most precious treasure—its children—for transnational adoption.

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<sup>35</sup> Based on Dr Mi-jeong Lee’s study, “Domestic and Overseas Adoption and Unwed Mothers’ Welfare,” Jane Jeong Trenka points out in “Transnational Adoption and the ‘Financialization of Everything,’” that instead of exporting children out to other countries for adoption permanently, North Korea sent children to other countries with North Korean nurses, and the children were brought back later. Facing North Korea’s critique, South Korea “had nothing to rebut against North Korea.” See <[http://www.conducivemag.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=82:transnational-adoption-and-the-financialization-of-everything4569&catid=38:innovative-thinking&Itemid=61](http://www.conducivemag.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=82:transnational-adoption-and-the-financialization-of-everything4569&catid=38:innovative-thinking&Itemid=61)>

However, while all condemn South Korea for solving its social problems after the Korean War by sending children away, the practice still persists. In other words, few interrogate the continued practice of sending children abroad. Moreover, it is often described/justified as an act of humanitarianism. In the master narrative of transnational adoption, this humanitarian justification defines the difference between exporting children and transnational adoption. However, according to Tobias Hübinette, the experience of transnational adoptees is in fact very similar to that of the Atlantic slave trade between the 16<sup>th</sup>-century and 19<sup>th</sup>-centuries, the dispatching of Indians and Chinese indentured labor from 1864 to 1941, and the “massive trafficking of women and children for international marriage and sexual exploitation” at the present time (143). Moreover, the experience also parallels the “domestic transracial adoptions of children from indigenous and minority groups to white families,” which have been “highly charged and contested and sometimes even branded ethnocide or cultural genocide” (141).<sup>36</sup> According to Hübinette, the similarity comes from the analogy that both the enslaved and the adoptees are forced to migrate for the insatiable demand from the “consumers,” for market interests, and for profit making.

Laura Briggs also suggests in her essay, “Sex, Reproduction, and Foreign Policy” that “the language of sentiment, rescue” and the language of “doing good” in the world are never innocent, and are ultimately as dangerous as “virile” discourses for militarism (23). As Briggs states, before the photos and reports of the ferocity and prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib are released, most people do not have sufficient grounds to question the benevolence and morality of the United States military invasion in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many believe the American government’s claims in the name of intervention: the act is to liberate local victims from dictatorship to

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<sup>36</sup> In their essay, “A sociological Approach to Race, Identity, and Asian Adoption,” Jiannbin Shiao and Mia Tuan hold similar opinions, see especially 157-59.

stabilize civil unrest and terrorism, and to help develop democracy. As the report of the brutality in the prison confronts the American's knowledge about the war, the military act turns out to be an affront to the believer of the government's claim. In this regard, most adoptive parents, policy makers, and those who support the practice engage themselves in transnational adoption because of the rhetoric of humanitarianism embedded in the master narrative. E. J. Graff demystifies the "orphan crisis" by exposing the fact that the story of abandoned or orphaned infants who need loving homes and adoring parents abroad is largely fictional.<sup>37</sup> It becomes fictional because, for those with vested interests in the practice, they need to justify themselves to make people believe in the decency of their act because they need people's support. As Briggs suggests, there are people who use human rights, support, and the belief in decency to champion victims and there are also people who use these very terms to victimize people.

In order to avoid consumer-oriented transnational adoption and to give sufficient attention to matters of race and international hierarchies of privilege, Kristi Brian argues that it is reasonable to demand adoption agencies to start reducing the need of the practice. Transnational adoption scholar Peter Selman points out that the practice of transnational adoption has continued by adopting children from Romania, then China and Russia, and finally African countries even as Korea and South American countries decrease the number of foreign adoption. In Selman's words, the "market" remains as long as the demand from the West continues and as long as money is involved in the process.<sup>38</sup> E. J. Graff also points out that once a country stops sending children abroad, adoption agencies can always find another country to

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<sup>37</sup> See E. J. Graff's essay, "The Lie We Love."

<sup>38</sup> This is from an interview that Peter Selman has with *Newsweek*. The title of the interview is "Baby Backlash." It is an interview on the topic of baby trafficking and intercountry adoptions. For more detailed information regarding to the interview, see < <http://www.newsweek.com/id/104698>>.

make up for the supply. As the practice continues, the language of humanitarian benevolence will remain necessary for the operation of adoption agencies. Jane Jeong Trenka also maintains that the reform of intercountry adoption relies on eliminating the monetary incentive that drives it. Otherwise, being taken in by the language of humanity and the rhetoric of “rescue” while ignoring the lucrative side of the practice will be more likely to create an orphan instead of saving a child.<sup>39</sup>

In the dominant narrative, ideologies in Korea society and those in the United States partly help construct the practice of transnational adoption. While the dominant narrative of transnational adoption endeavors to highlight humanitarianism in the practice, the enterprise of transnational adoption actually demands a rethinking and reevaluation of the practice itself. Languages produced by the clash of these ideologies not only fortify, facilitate, and validate transnational adoption but they also assume an unwavering nature in each sending and receiving society. The following analysis of Trenka’s memoir intends to explore the textual articulation of an adult adoptee, whose experience not only is different from what the master narrative of transnational adoption has been communicating but whose narrative also helps us understand what transnational adoption appears to be for an adoptee.

## **2.2 Challenging the Master Narrative of Transnational Adoption in *The Language of Blood***

Among the many books and films about adoption, Jane Jeong Trenka’s memoir *The Language of Blood* stands out as a voice challenging the dominant master narrative of transnational adoption. In an interview with Shannon Fimbel, Jane Jeong Trenka expresses not only her expectation of creating multiple voices in the narrative

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<sup>39</sup> Here I intend to focus on the relation between the language of adoption and the practice. The relation between transnational adoption and money will be discussed in the next chapter.

of transnational adoption but also her wish to speak as an adoptee in her memoir. In terms of *The Language of Blood*, we can find that there is a discrepancy between the mainstream narrative of transnational adoption and what the adoptee actually faces in real life. The rhetoric of gifts and “being saved” is accepted and taken for granted by most people whether they are involved in transnational adoption. However, in her memoir, Trenka dwells on the tension between “seeming and being” by mulling over the glittering appearance, which is what people are usually told about transnational adoption, and the reality of the adoptee’s life (226). Her attempts to write her experiences in different genres create a narrative tension that not only reflects her doubled self—the Korean daughter Kyong-Ah and the adoptee American Jane—but also question the language in master narrative of transnational adoption.

The doubleness in Trenka’s experience is unavoidable because there is a racial difference between her and the adoptive family. Being an Asian child raised by white parents, Trenka constantly came across people who came up and talked to her and her family with curiosity when she was little. The questions that the people brought up were often impolite and even rude, which also reinforces her feeling as an outsider who is not accepted in the white dominant society because of her Asian looks. She could not help think about what her life could be if she were not brought to the new family and she imagines how she is brought to her new parents’ home when she was a six-month-old. Trenka becomes a playwright writing herself into a character in the play. By describing how her sister Carol is looking for Korean faces in the new environment and by depicting Carol’s past life in Korea at the same time, Trenka directs and controls the focus of the scene and what should be presented. Unlike what most adoption agencies have “promised,” the plot here is no longer about how happy the new family is and how radiant the smiles of the parents and the adoptees are, but about how Carol the adoptee misses her life with the birth family. Moreover, in the

end of the play, when Trenka says that “at the end of the movie sequence, the Korean memories are completely erased, and the reel-to-reel projector shows blank frames and white noise, as seen at a beginning or ending take-up length of tape,” this presumed closure to the past is disturbed by the sense of grief and repression since the adoptee “has willed herself to become a girl with no history and is now ready to start her new life” (18). It is a closure imposed on the adoptee not only because she is taken away from her birth family and country but also because a “clear break” or “clear cut” from the past is deemed necessary for the construction of a new family.

In order to make a clear cut, in Trenka’s adoptive family the a-word, adoption and the k-word, Korea, are forbidden. Trenka’s mother also tells her that it is not possible for Trenka to correspond with her birth mother (38). When Trenka asks why she is given away, the question irritates the adoptive mother. It is made clear in the adoptive mother’s reaction that the past should be erased and never talk about. As Eun Kyung Min argues, “for the transnational adoptee raised in a white adoptive family, and thus cut off from an Asian community, the pressure to assimilate by disavowing and repressing her racial identity can be all the more extreme” (121). Being afraid that she would be given away again, Trenka is so regretful that she blames herself for asking the question which irritates her adoptive mother: “Who could love such a stupid child who says such stupid things? There must be something wrong with me. I must be rotten, truly bad” (24). The anger, sadness and loss of the adoptee sneaks in under the cover of self-blaming. The experience that Trenka has is never, as she says, “the convenient and fateful equation for me: my parents didn’t have children and I needed a home” (226). The “unquantifiables” of the freedom in America and her loss of language and culture of her birth country are never calculable (229). In her experience, appearance and reality have never been the same to Trenka. The difference is most obvious in the colorblindness of the adoptive parents.

Trenka's adoptive parents are devout Lutherans, and they adopt Trenka and Carol out of religious piety and community pressure. As Trenka writes, in her adopted hometown Harlow everyone is prescribed with their responsibility: "men must be husbands and fathers. If they are not, they are eccentric old bachelor cousins or junior high English teachers. Likewise, Women are wives and mothers. They must be mothers, not just wives, and if the children are not born soon, people talk" (19). Trenka's teacher, Miss Larson, who remains single without any intention of getting married, is the object of compassion in Harlow. People talk about her marital status "with a knowing nod," and they "pray" for her when they learn the fact that she does not intend to get married and have a family (35). The pressure from the community in fact turns women without husbands and women without children into victims rather than objects of compassion. Within this cultural context, the community technically compels women to be mothers. Thus, as transnational adoption becomes "a plausible choice" for adoptive parents, it also shores up an idealized notion of kinship, making good of the white heterosexual nuclear family (Eng 26).

Back in the early 1970s when Trenka was adopted, in order to adopt children, Trenka's adoptive parents needed to "prove to the social worker from Moorhead that they were good enough, earned enough, were Christian enough" (26). As Pastor Mattson says to Trenka's adoptive parents, "God does not see the color of our skin," and "He made us all the same in His image" (25). The way that the Brauers raised Trenka and her sister as their own indeed mirrors their religious belief. However, while in-race adoptive parents can weigh the advantages and disadvantages of telling the truth to their adoptees, there is no bypath left for transracial adopters. As the memoir shows, memories can be erased by taking the children away from birth countries, just like the way that Carol does not remember any Korean at all. But the visible difference between parents and children is not easily overlooked, and yet

Trenka's parents chose to ignore the difference. Writing a scene in a restaurant into a musical, for example, Trenka vividly portrays the colorblindness of the parents:

“Some of the DINERS touch the girls as if they are dolls and push CAROL and JANE roughly in their chairs. MARGARET and FRED continue reading their menus, holding them over their faces, oblivious to the crowd of DINERS at their table” (34). And then the musical continues mocking the adoptees, revealing the racism and stereotypes about Asians in the adoptive country.

The colorblindness of the adoptive parents creates the “absent presence” of the adoptee. It is the coexistence of absence and presence in the double bind of colorblindness. The adopters see the adoptees because the adoptees are there to complete the adopters' role as parents, but the adoptee also reminds the parents their inability to have a child of their own. Hence Trenka claims that in her adoptive family, the adoptee is in fact a replacement of the white boy who has never been born to her parents. Being a replacement means being invisible because she is not recognized by the parents for who she is. For Trenka, as she says, she is like nothing more than a doll which can be returned to the shop (24), a “people-pleaser” (206), and a “pathetic little dogs” (207). David Howe points out in *Patterns of Adoption* that

the quality of parenting and family relationship do affect adopted children's social and emotional adjustment. Adoption studies of children placed as babies consistently report that the outcome is heavily influenced by the skills, attitudes and relationship style of the adopters. Parents who are able to relate to and communicate with partners and children in an open, accurate, sensitive, stable and empathic way are most likely to produce well-adjusted children (68).

Howe also suggests that adopted children show marginally higher rates of “anxiety to be accepted by adults. Low self-esteem and feelings of insecurity are also more likely



to be present” (24). In the memoir, the anxiety to be accepted is always present. For instance, one time Trenka confesses “How I wanted parents like that, parents who wanted me for me, not to act and look like their white child who had never existed” (110). As a child, she expresses her anxiety by stating “I must be very, very good so my mommy will keep me. I won’t ask any more stupid questions. I won’t do anything to make her mad. I will be so good for her. I will be perfect” (25). After she grows up, she feels frustrated because she attempts to do well and struggles to gain recognition from their parents, only to find that, as her friend Mary says, no matter how good she is, what the parents want from you is “for you to be someone you’re not” (207). Her parents see her without seeing her. The invisibility is to the level that her adoptive father mocks her Asian boyfriend in front of her. To Trenka, the anxiety to be accepted and the sense of insecurity is equal to “self-loathing, the kind you get when you discover that you must be one of two things to your dad, either invisible or ridiculous; the kind you get when you hate your own face, so much like your boyfriend’s and so easily mocked; the kind you get when you want to love your father but hate him instead” (67).

While Trenka’s parents show their ignorance of the racial difference, many studies have shown the importance of race, ethnicity, and parents’ support for positive self-identity formation of adoptees.<sup>40</sup> In “Utilization of Structural Equation Modeling to Predict Psychological Well-Being Among Adopted Korean Children,” Dong Pil Yoon states that adoptees’ psychological health is related to their relationship with parents. According to Yoon, family warmth and communication patterns are the primary source of psychological well-being for adoptees. Family support that provides a feeling of love and a sense of belongingness is positive for the

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<sup>40</sup> For more studies on the relation between an adoptee’s identity formation and parents’ support, see Nam Soon Huh, M. Elizabeth Bonk et al., Tai Soon Bai, Dong Pil Yoon, Daniel B. Lee, and David Howe.

development of adoptee's sense of self. These adoptees also have less emotional distress than those who do not have support and warmth from family. However, Trenka's adoptive parents refuse to talk about Korea. They refuse to travel to Korea with Trenka to meet her Korean family. They also refuse to attend the memorial service for Trenka's birth mother. To Trenka, the refusals are signs of denial to see Trenka for who she is and a denial to provide the family support that she needs. Facing the denial and colorblindness of her adoptive parents and out of despair, Trenka comes to assume that an understanding between her mother and she could be possible only if they are really blind: "Would we know each other by touch? Touch me here, Mom, in this place where I am sorry, where I love you, where I need to be healed" (231).

Moreover, in Trenka's adoptive family, emotions are sanitized. When Trenka's paternal grandma is dead, Trenka's adoptive father is also asked by her adoptive mother to control his sadness and sorrow in front of the family (59). And as Trenka says, "in a family that doesn't talk much," there is no communication about feelings between the adoptive parents and children, either (201). Trenka also experiences discrimination from the society and assumes that being different is a negative thing. At school, other children leer at her and some children are not allowed to play with her. Adults do not feel compelled to defend her when some people call her a "chink" or a "rice-picker." Her college application form is returned as she automatically checks "white" for ethnicity (129). She seeks out other Asians in America after her reunion with her birth family, only to find that she is not accepted by them either because she is "still not Asian enough, suspected of being a subcutaneous white supremacist" (215). Trenka is like the dragon in the story she has created, "The Happy Village" (53). As the dragon tries hard to behave in order to earn trust from the villagers, it is still not allowed to become one of the members in the

Happy Village. Being an Asian in Harlow, Minnesota is like being the dragon who wants to enter the village but never will be accepted. In the memoir, the rejection from her society disturbs our understanding of the rhetoric of love and demands us to question the practice of transracial and transnational adoption.

In an interview with Bryan Thao Worra, Trenka states that the reason that she writes a lot about language and the body is because she is “bothered by them and they won’t leave me alone.”<sup>41</sup> When she studies in college, Trenka is stalked by a fellow student who has a .38 caliber pistol in his possession and breaks into her house with “the basic intentions of kidnapping Jane, raping her, and then killing her” (87). After “her stalker” is arrested, according to the psychological evaluation of the guy, he admits that he bought video camera equipment “so that he could record his exploits of raping and killing the intended victim so that he could further enjoy the experience again and again later on...” (87). Moreover, one winter day in Minnesota, Trenka is approached by a guy in a supermarket who thinks of her as a foreigner because of her oriental face. He talks to her in order to “offer her a job” to “cane” or “punish” him (99). She is irritated to find that, other than “her stalker,” there is “one more white guy who couldn’t keep his Asians straight” (99). In the memoir, the copies of a white guy’s personal ad and an ad of an adult website reflect the stereotype/fantasy about the sexuality of Asian women. Trenka creates a theater piece of monologue named “Don Worry. I Will Make You Feel Comfortable” to represent racial and gendered stereotypes about Asian women. The monologue reflects the fact that to the Caucasians in her imagined audience, who represent the majority of Americans in her real life, she is, as “her stalker” says, “a gook, a chink,” and “nothing but a Korean in a white man’s society” (83).

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<sup>41</sup> For a detailed information about the interview, see <[http://voices.cla.umn.edu/readings/trenka\\_jane.html](http://voices.cla.umn.edu/readings/trenka_jane.html)>

According to Eun Kyung Min, Trenka's intention in writing *The Language of Blood* is "not to condemn transnational adoption outright or to be 'geneticist,' but to say that there are losses entailed in transnational adoption that cannot, and should not, be rationalized or imagined away" (124). An author's vision always reflects her social status in relation to gender, ethnicity, nationality, political perspective, and involvement in the adoption triad. To Trenka, "blood" in the title is not "a signifier of biology, nature, the given" but "the memory without language," the "silenced memory, what is not allowed to be remembered, and that which nonetheless survives this silencing" (Min 125). Hence, if transnational adoption is one of the solutions for the women who are oppressed in the patriarchal society of Korea and also for women who suffer the social stigma placed on women without children in the United States, the practice would also be a mechanism that not only supports the gendered ideology within patriarchal society but also reinforces the ideology that prioritizes white middle-class nuclear family building over "the best interests for children." In this respect, the migration of the female body only serves to enhance patriarchy because it is marked with the violence and repression imposed on women and mothers. Moreover, we should not imagine away the losses of the adoptee, nor should we ignore the experience that the female body encounters after she is adopted. Without taking Trenka's losses into consideration, the process of her adoption is not only a commodification, her experiences with the stalker and the harasser are also a sign of a prolonged objectification of female body in the experience of transnational adoption.

As mentioned, Trenka designates her emotion as "han" (恨/한) after she has the experience of multiple alienation: being unrecognized for who she is by her adoptive parents, being unaccepted by an Asian-only community because she is not Asian enough, being told "Go back to where you came from" in a white society, being a human ball pitched around different adoption agency workers while requesting for

information about her adoption, and being rejected for the right of opening her own adoption file (238). According to Beth Kyong Lo, “han” “contains grudges, lamenting, regret, resentment, grief, and angst. It is conceived of as an ailment of the mind and heart, and inconsolable state of mind” (169). The result of “han” is “Hwa-byung,” (火病/화병) or pent-up anger.<sup>42</sup> It is “the accumulation of stressful life events with poor social support, and thus limited opportunities to express anger,” a mix of cultural, psychological, and biological factors (Lo 170). People suffer from Hwa-byung as a physical and psychological syndrome when they face “interpersonal conflicts and repressed anger, or anger turned inward and against the self as a defense against loss” (169). However, the psychological state of adoptees has seldom been the main consideration in transnational adoption.

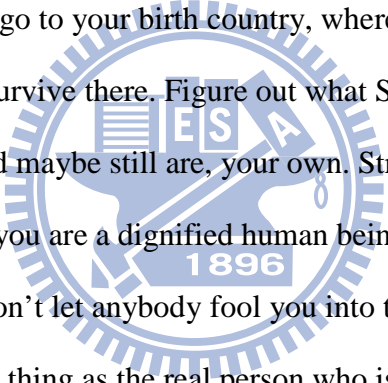
Trenka’s “han” comes from the interpersonal conflicts that she encounters when facing her family and society. The “han” is there when she is incapable of fulfilling the longing for “wholeness” and being “normal” (237). Trenka is frustrated because she does not see her experience resembles what she has been told, because she is not “a better daughter,” because she is not being grateful for receiving “the best interests” for her, because no one sees her as who she is, and because her loss is not recognized either by the people around her or in the master narrative of transnational adoption (227). The yearning to be a real white and northern Minnesotan is so tremendous that she fantasizes about a guillotine of her own when she sees the decapitation of chickens in the family ritual (237). To Trenka, her mental illness—“Reactive Attachment Disorder” and “PTSD”—are attributed to her experience of transnational adoption. Thus the “han” is the “repressed anger, or anger turned inward and against the self as a defense against loss” and it is also the “inconsolable state of

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<sup>42</sup> For a detailed discussion on Hwa-byung and the translation of the term, see Feng’s “Narratives of Transnational Adoption —The Case of *The Language of Blood*,” 422-23.

mind” that reflects the inner struggles that she is experiencing in searching and defining who she really is (Lo 169). The “han” is a lament about her loss, the resentment for not being recognized and accepted for who she is, and grief for the disharmony between her and her parents. Hence Trenka’s inner feeling is like a pendulum, oscillating back and forth between the expected feeling of gratitude and “han.”

As Trenka mentions in the Thao Worra interview, she encourages other adoptees to do whatever pleases them, whatever keeps them alive. In her essay, “Transnational Adoption and the ‘Financialization of Everything,’” Trenka communicates the same message,



I encourage you to go to your birth country, wherever that is. Figure out what you need to do to survive there. Figure out what Square One is to the people who were once, and maybe still are, your own. Struggle for justice. Never let anyone forget that you are a dignified human being with human rights, not a product for sale. Don’t let anybody fool you into thinking that your mother country is the same thing as the real person who is your mother. Find allies. Find a different way to solve problems. Go, see and hear for yourself. When the demand side starts to see you as a threat, refuse to shut up. Turn up the volume one more notch. Change history. Change the future. Do it with a deep and furious love.

As Trenka says, the “fact” in the adoption document, as well as the fact in the dominant narrative, can be wrong or misleading (232). But in her memoir, she can write about her experience in her own perspective. It is an experience about how an adoptee couldn’t adjust well in her adoptive family. She suffers from discrimination for being different in the white society. And it is her birth mother, a Korean woman in a patriarchal society with no money to bribe for the information about her abandoned

daughter, with “no helpful husband, no English skills, and hardly an education,” who finds her and contacts her (71). As Trenka says, “it is not supposed to happen this way” because it is very unusual for a birth mother to “find her child and not the other way around” (71). Unlike the mainstream narrative of transnational adoption, in the memoir, the adoptee’s birth mother is not absent, nor is she silent. She did not give her daughter away because the daughter is mix-raced. She is not a factory worker who gives birth to her daughter out of unexpected pregnancy, and she is not an un-wedded teenager, either. The voice of the birth mother is heard and she has a chance to tell the story about how she is forced to give up her children due to poverty and domestic violence. And the decision has tortured the birth mother for her whole life. None of what Trenka has really experienced is recorded in the dominant narrative, and none would be documented in her file. It is an experience that finally enables the adoptee to have a sense of belongingness and the love that she needs when she is reunited with her birth family.

Trenka observes that “People do not yield their power because they are nice and they want to lose some of it. And compliance has never, ever worked for oppressed people.”<sup>43</sup> She refuses to repeat the life of her birth mother who has lived under the shadow of violence and oppression in a male dominant society, and she refuses to sterilize her emotion in the way her adoptive mother has raised her. According to Eng, “in the context of transnational adoption, consumptive labor produces and shores up the social and psychic boundaries of the white heterosexual nuclear family, guaranteeing its integrity and the sanctity of its ideals” (12). To avoid becoming what she sees in the lives of both mothers, Trenka has an “anticipation of

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<sup>43</sup> This is from the same essay that I quote in the end of the previous section. For more details on what Trenka says in the essay, see [http://www.conducivemag.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=82:transnational-adoption-and-the-financialization-of-everything4569&catid=38:innovative-thinking&Itemid=61](http://www.conducivemag.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=82:transnational-adoption-and-the-financialization-of-everything4569&catid=38:innovative-thinking&Itemid=61)

metamorphosis” so that she can migrate and transform like a butterfly (120). As the litany of recounting what happened in the past becomes the way for the birth mother to ask for forgiveness, by way of writing Trenka turns what has bothered her, language and the body, into a way to achieve her transformation. As she says, she writes, she resists, and she refuses to be erased. She writes so that she could become a butterfly “who are not informed of their own impossibility or frailty, who act on some faint memory without asking why” as the way she carries her birth mother “in the language of blood.”<sup>44</sup> And through writing, the adoptee heals the trauma that she has suffered from the transnational migration.

*The Language of Blood* is about a transnational adoptee whose experience not only goes against the grain of dominant narrative of transnational adoption but also discloses the clash between the gender ideologies in two different cultures. Behind the slogan of multiculturalism embraced by adopters and adoptive agencies, is in fact “the notion of cultures as bounded entities, which can be placed on hierarchies according to moral worth” (Brian 71). Moreover, Hosu Kim indicates that the belief that “America offers the ‘best’ place of refuge to needy children” is one of the reasons that many Americans conceive of transnational adoption as morally compelling (147). More often than not, transnational adoption is often related not only to multiculturalism but also to moral integrity. In this regard, when the dominant discourse of transnational adoption talks about rescuing women and children, the practice is also related to a neocolonial idea that there is a culture of sex and gender which is essentially different from or less civilized than another and thus needs to be “rescued.” According to Briggs, this notion is dangerous because it is imperialistic and hierarchical.<sup>45</sup> Both the notion of rescuing a culture and the act of rescuing it

<sup>44</sup> For the description above, see *The Language of Blood*, 160 and 251.

<sup>45</sup> In Laura Briggs’ essay, “Sex, Reproduction, and Foreign Policy: from Abu Ghraib to Transnational Adoption,” Briggs elaborates feminist critique on this notion.



through the practice of transnational adoption are problematic. With the representation of the struggles with racism, depression and alienation, *The Language of Blood* reveals that adoption across boundaries of race, nation, and culture “does indeed exact a very real emotional and spiritual cost” (Oparah et al. 5). In the final analysis, to accept the rhetoric of rescue, humanitarianism, love and generosity in transnational adoption without considering the loss of family, culture, and language for an adoptee not only is a reproduction of the “banality of evil,” but also bolsters up gendered ideology in societies that keeps on oppressing women.



### Chapter Three

#### “For the Sake of Children” ? :

##### Transnational Adoption in *A Gesture Life*

For me, that is what fiction should do--bring home for the reader not just an act, historical or not, but the aftereffects, what happens in the act's wake. And, most interestingly, how people live in that wake. They do, and they do so well. That's what's so chilling about human nature sometimes, and that's the stuff a fiction writer just drools over when he finds it.<sup>46</sup>

~Chang-rae Lee

In this chapter, I intend to discuss the way how the experience of transnational adoption is represented in *A Gesture Life*. I attempt to study this representation from two aspects. First, I will analyze the adoptive father's narration regarding his own experience of being an adoptee and his motif of adopting a Korean daughter. Next, the relationship between the adoptive father and daughter will be analyzed. Finally, to conclude my thesis, I will discuss how the correspondence between the experience of the adoptive daughter, Sunny, and that of the comfort woman, K, might reflect the manipulation of the female adoptees' life.

To investigate Hata's narration, I will begin with the way he talks about his experiences with the comfort woman, the Hickeys', and his adoptive daughter. I argue that his intention behind the concern for others is out of his longing to belong. Thus his adopting Sunny is also one of his “gestures” to become a part of the society of Bedley Run. Hata feels that he needs to discard his past because he believes that one has to be good enough to be adopted and also has to feel honored and appreciative for the chance of really becoming Japanese. Therefore, when he tries to change his life by

<sup>46</sup> See <<http://www.beatrice.com/interviews/lee/>>

adopting Sunny, he also thinks that he is entitled to expect Sunny to help build the image of a perfect family. Hata always tries to justify his decision to adopt Sunny even though we find there is a discrepancy between his narration and reality. For one thing, the adopter-adoptee relationship is described only through the narration of the adoptive father. In other words, the adoptee is silenced. Not only is she silenced from the description of her own experience, but there is a distortion in the description because the narrator of the story of transnational adoption is an unreliable storyteller.

In the second part of this chapter, in order to investigate the relationship between the adopter and adoptee, I will apply Foucault's theory of biopolitics.<sup>47</sup> In *Essential Works III: Power*, Foucault points out that "Society's control over individuals was accomplished not only through consciousness or ideology but also in the body and with the body. For capitalistic society, it was biopolitics, the biological, the corporal, that mattered more than anything else" (137). Biopolitics accounts for a historical process in which life appears as the object of political strategies. While the manipulation over the body of the comfort woman turns K into nothing more than a sexual object, Hata's adopting Sunny is another product of biopolitics. Throughout the process of transnational adoption, the subjectivity of the female adoptee is not only invisible to the adopter but also absent to the adoption agency. The language of ownership in Hata's narration and the capitalist exchange described in the novel reflects the commodification of adoptees and reveals the two-sidedness in transnational adoption: rescuing and consuming children at the same time.

In addition to the objectification of the female body, the absence of the adoptee's origin and past is also the focal point of my analysis. Hata's experience plays an important part in his relationship with Sunny. What happened in the past

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<sup>47</sup> According to Michel Foucault, biopolitics designates what "brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power and agent of transformation of human life." See *The History of Sexuality*, 143.

certainly plays as a key to the present and how Hata tries to cope with the present is also the way he attempts to deal with the trauma in the past. In the end of Hata's unreliable storytelling, the only thing that we can be sure in the narration is that the truth can never be clear, which also uncovers the ambiguity of the two-sidedness in transnational adoption. In what follows, I will first start with an analysis of Hata's narration in order to further explore how transnational adoption becomes a gesture for the adoptive father to blend in the society.

### 3.1 Unreliable Narrative and the Pursuit for Belongingness

In Hata's narration, he always acts with sympathy towards others. When he shares his experiences with the comfort woman, the Hickeys', and his adoptive daughter, however, there is a contradiction between what he tells and what actually has happened. In other words, what we read is actually only one side of the story because what Hata hides is more than what he reveals. In fact, Hata also oppresses the comfort women, and is the survivor of the traumatic experience but goes on to construct a life of prosperity and happiness. As Hata's adoptive daughter Sunny says, "You make a whole life out of gestures and politeness. You are always having to be the ideal partner and colleague" (95). Hata never gives a confession. His narrative only provides "an acknowledgement of what happened without any real show of emotion when he tells you."<sup>48</sup> In this way, *A Gesture Life* does not only present the experience of comfort women and transnational adoption, but it also explores the aftereffect of one's encounter with such an experience.

Studies on *A Gesture Life* mainly discuss the social and historical phenomena of comfort women; issues of gender, race, and nation; and

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<sup>48</sup> The opinion is from Lee's interview with Ron Hogan, see <<http://www.beatrice.com/interviews/lee/>>.

post-colonialism. For instance, in “Transcending Ethnicity: Diasporicity in *A Gesture Life*,” Young-oak Lee investigates the concept of diaspora and how it is applied in the portrayal of Hata.<sup>49</sup> According to Lee, the novel not only deals with the theme of the development of Asian American identity and uses the metaphor of diaspora to heighten the trope of isolation in white society, but it also goes further to carry the meaning of diaspora to abstract and spiritual levels, instead of only physical ones. To Hata, the diaspora goes beyond physical realities such as nation, race or geographical boundaries and transcends everything, with which Hata becomes a stranger at home. In another essay, “Gender, Race, and the Nation in *A Gesture Life*,” Lee delves into the layers of Hata’s ideologies to examine how his life is molded by his mental frameworks and studies the cultural codes that have constructed his subjectivity. She argues that in *A Gesture Life*, “the theme of national identity is interwoven and interconnected with the themes of race and sexuality” (157). Continually seeking approval, Hata is obsessed with the problem of blending into his adoptive societies. He is actually both a colonizer and a patriarch because he makes his situation politically advantageous and useful to himself by applying the mechanism of gender ideology in the traditional patriarchal society and through the practice of adoption.

Kandice Chuh studies the representation of comfort woman in *A Gesture Life* and demands especial vigilance against “self-subalternization” in Asian American studies (8).<sup>50</sup> According to Chuh, *A Gesture Life* promotes a certain kind of historiography that articulates a dynamic relationship between past and present. In this

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<sup>49</sup> Young-oak Lee applied Stuart Hall’s and Edward Said’s conceptions of diaspora to investigate the diasporic phenomenon in the novel. Lee defines that diasporic identity transcends the constraints of ethnicity, place, or homeland connections and refers to the status of an individual. It is characterized by a sense of displacement, aloneness, and permanent uprootedness. As Lee points out, “A person is diasporic when he refuses to be labeled and when his identity, due to repeated relocation, cannot be defined by political, social, and cultural attachments” (68).

<sup>50</sup> Self-subalternization refers to “a process by which the critic identifies with a position of powerlessness in order, paradoxically, to claim a certain kind of academic power.” See Kandice Chuh’s essay, “Discomforting Knowledge, or Korean ‘Comfort Women’ and Asian Americanist critical practice,” page 8.

narrative, the “comfort woman” enfigures the history of the Japanese colonial occupation of Korea. As the novel explores the ways of remembrance, the story allows us to rethink how subjects of history are constructed. Through the emphasis on Hata’s memory and the history of the triad—Korean, Japan, and the United States, *A Gesture Life* does not relate the past to the present within a cause-and-effect paradigm. In other words, the past is possibly one of the causes that underlie certain ends, but it is not a singular factor. Chuh argues that as Hata feels a sense of failure in his attempts to save K, the adoptee Sunny serves as a second chance for Hata to “save.” However, unlike K, Sunny is an enfiguration of U.S. military intervention in Korea. Thus, according to Chuh, Chang-rae Lee’s representation of “Hata’s failed attempt at redemption through Sunny suggests that inadequacy of the U.S. hegemonic narrative that explains Korean freedom from Japanese occupation as gifted by U.S. forces” (16). It means that while Hata’s self-identity might be shaped by past experiences, the act of narration, of breaking silence can not remedy both the past and the present. Hata’s experience with K might be part of the reason but not a definitive factor that causes his contemporary problems. Therefore, Chuh suggests that the narrative in the novel allows us to go a step further to reflect on Asian American production of knowledge about comfort women.

The adopter-adoptee relationship and the adoption writing are studied in Mark C. Jerng’s psychoanalytical essay, “Recognizing the Transracial Adoptee: Adoption Life Stories and Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life*.” Jerng elaborates Freud’s essay, “Constructions in Analysis,” and Lacan’s thoughts of transference to interpret the adopter-adoptee relationship. According to Jerng, based on his study on the confusions of temporality and the ambivalence of address in *A Gesture Life*, “adoption is figured in terms of a transference: a relation in which the parent sustains the adoptive relationship through taking the child as someone else” (45). In the

representation of transnational adoption in *A Gesture Life*, there is the question of recognition within the dynamics of adoption. It is “the difficulty of acknowledging each other and each other’s desires” that leads to the problem of addressing the other and of taking someone for someone else (53). As Hata often expresses his desire for a real father-daughter bond and a real family, the language he uses also conveys his willful ignoring of Sunny “as part of how he manages his ‘cherished relations’” (61). In this way, Jerng argues that “the dynamics of adoption in the novel unfold a series of psychic crises around the unsettlements of race, nation, and domesticity, which pervade larger issues in the representation of transracial adoption” (41).

My own reading focuses on the unreliability of Hata as a narrator. Since there is no confession to make and little emotion in the narration, the narrator in *A Gesture Life* only lets people know what has happened and let it sit there without expressing his true feelings. He tells all, but in a way, he also does not want to tell. This creates a great distance and drama between the terrible reality and the calm and placid way in which the story is revealed. In other words, Hata’s unreliability in his storytelling has to do with the feelings, emotion, and psyche that he hides. He feels the need to hide his emotion and to justify himself in order to be accepted. For example, to the Hickeys’, even though Hata knows that the business of Sunny Medical Supply is going down and that it would be difficult for the Hickeys’ to run the business, he keeps this information to himself. He is sympathetic towards the Hickeys’, but because he keeps the real condition of Sunny Medical Supply a secret, he is in fact part of what brings the “bad luck” to the Hickeys’ (125). In the novel, Hata justifies his actions by reminding himself about what he does for the Hickeys’ after selling them the store. In Hata’s narration, he shows that he is worried about the Hickeys’ by visiting their business often to help out. However, Hata’s actions are seen as pretentious to Mr. Hickey. While Mrs. Hickey tells Hata that her husband wonders if

“you sold us a lemon, that you knew the business would only get worse but made out as if otherwise,” we learn that Hata in fact is probably not reliable (125). Confronted with the questions of Mrs. Hickey, Hata avoids admitting that he is a part of the “bad luck” by saying that people should “graciously accept all realities” (127). Thus we can see how he avoids his responsibility and attributes the situation to Mr. Hickey’s refusal of his help.

Also, for the most part, the narration is about Hata’s concerns for the people around him, and how he offers helps and often gets rejected. However, the intention behind his concern is never discussed, and the truth is gradually revealed in what other people around him have said, rather than in Hata’s own narration. Therefore, it is in Mrs. Hickey’s question that we see how Hata is either deceiving himself or trying to avoid confessing his real motivation in helping people. Similarly, Hata is willing to offer help to the comfort woman, K, because he thinks he loves K. However, K turns the table on Hata by telling the truth “I never wanted your help.... You think you love me but what you really want you don’t yet know because you are young and decent. But I will tell you now, it is my sex” (300). He attributes the sexual experience that he has with K to his youthfulness and the pure love that he has for K (296). But in fact, for K, Hata is not different from other soldiers in the army. Like them, all that Hata wants from her is just sex. The imagined idea of “love” makes Hata think that he himself is different from other soldiers. Yet as what K points out, he does not see her for who she is. Likewise, Hata insists that he helps the Hickey out of his real concern for the family even when he is confronted with Mr. Hickey’s doubts about his true motivation. In fact, when Hata intends to become the number one citizen in Bedlyrun, his concern for the Hickey is actually his alibi for the family’s terrible situation. And the Hickeys is again a tool for him to become the one part of the society. While assisting the Hickeys becomes an act to prove his concerns for their family after he



sold them the “lemon,” similarly, Hata’s “love” for K turns out to be just his excuse for assisting in her oppression.

I submit that being an adoptee determines Hata’s identity as an outsider, and so he wants to be accepted. The need to be accepted, or the sense of un-belongingness, exists not only at the time when he is living in the United States, but also during his time in Japan. Critics connect Hata’s longing for recognition to his experience with K. In “Traumatic Patriarchy: Reading Gendered Nationalisms in Chang Rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life*,” Hamilton Carroll argues that “Hata’s attempts to inaugurate his own nationally visible subjectivity are predicted on his abjection of K and Sunny” because Hata believes that the successful resolution to become a citizen is to lose one’s uniqueness and to be incorporated into the new environment. Also, in “Colonial Naming and Renaming in *A Gesture Life* by Cang-rae Lee,” Keith Russell suggests that the shortening of Kkutaeh’s name to “K” could stand for the first letter of Korea. However, as Hata “hoped that if he could simply be near to her, near to her voice and to her body—if never even touching her—near, he thought, to her sleeping mind, he might somehow be found,” the longing for recognition is in fact already there when he meets K (240). In fact, the sense of un-belongingness has never left Hata and it is also doomed to remain with him because of his past as a Korean adoptee in a Japanese family. Based on Chang-rae Lee’s study in Korean transnational adoption, the case of a Japanese family adopting a Korean child is “very unusual. It’s probably happened as many times as the number of fingers on my hand. But I felt I wanted to have him right from the start be part of a family that he could never belong to and be a part of.”<sup>51</sup> In the novel, Hata starts the storytelling with the sentence, “People know me here,” implying the compatibility between Hata and his environment (1). And he is also

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<sup>51</sup> For the detail of the reply in an interview, see <<http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/poems/a.gesture.life.html>>.

careful about his language and does not express the sense of un-belongingness in his narration. This sense of un-belongingness is only symbolically conveyed in his eagerness to blend in. Hata is eager probably because, as Chang-rae Lee once said in an interview, Hata realizes that “he can never possibly really belong in the ways that we imagine that we can—that it’s always mitigated not just by one’s past but by who we are, that belonging really is a fiction that makes our lives happy and glorious.”<sup>52</sup> He struggles to belong his whole life and that is why Sunny said he makes “a whole life out of gestures and politeness” (95). To Hata, not only K, the letter and the comfort woman, symbolizes his origin and reminds him of his identity as an adoptee, the experience of being an immigrant in the United States also symbolically reproduces his experience as an adoptee. The transnational adoption story in *A Gesture Life* corresponds to the Asian American experiences of immigration to the United States. In the history of Asia American immigration, the way that the immigrants are assimilated by the empire can be interpreted as a process of adoption—immigrants being adopted by the United States—because the immigrants are not born in the country, but rather become a part of the country through immigration laws. Being an adoptee and an immigrant, Hata is always trapped in the struggle for recognition as a citizen in the adoptive country and also in a constant struggle for the need to abject his origin in exchange for a new subjectivity, and to distance himself from his origins in order to fit in to his new environment.

Adoption novels are often about quests for lost biological origins because biological origins are believed to be helpful in finding out who the adoptee really is.<sup>53</sup> While most adoption narratives deal with the search for identity through a reunion with the birth family or country, there is not an original family for the adoptees to

<sup>52</sup> See <<http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/poems/a.gesture.life.html>>.

<sup>53</sup> See Margaret Homans’ “Adoption Narrative, Trauma, and Origins,” especially page 10.

trace back in *A Gesture Life*. For example, in *The Language of Blood*, the adoptee tries a variety of writing style to express her loss. To her adoptive family, she is a replacement for the child that her parents were never able to have. To the people in the United States, she is always an outsider, “nothing but a Korean in a white man’s society” (83). As Trenka says “it is all about where you find your love”; and she finds her love and her sense of belongingness when she is reunited with her birth mother. In *A Gesture Life*, however, there is a loss of origin. Hata’s narration has a conspicuous absence about his life with his birth family. Although being an adoptee is also a traumatic experience that influences Hata throughout his life, looking for the birth family does not play a key role in his adoption narrative. Instead, the narration focuses on how adoptees struggle for identity in their life after the adoption. When Hata talks about the past, it is much more like he is trying to deal with the present. Due to the sense of failure that he has kept with him based on the experience in the past, he has difficulties moving on and thus constantly has to relate the past to the present. For Hata, only by justifying his actions in the past could he be able to deal with the present.

Chang-rae Lee’s portrayals of the adoptee’s life does not focus on the adoptee’s relationship with his origin, but rather on his life at present. The eagerness to become the number one citizen, the unofficial mayor in the little suburbia town, a part of his neighborhood and a proper American citizen are what motivate Hata to adopt a daughter overseas. The transnational adoption is one of his “gestures” to achieve his goal of belonging. In the end of the novel, the great efforts that Doc Hata has made for assimilation are in vain because none of his gestures, including adopting Sunny, really helps him to build a home to return to. In the final words of the novel, what he can find is to “come almost home”(356). Chang-rae Lee describes Hata’s

situation as in “the dissonance between his life and the life around him.”<sup>54</sup> The dissonance is “as home and homey as he could ever find.”<sup>55</sup> In this novel, belonging is a fiction and it is impossible to get no matter how hard Doc Hata tries to become a part of where he is.

### 3.2 Between Adopter and Adoptee

Hata and Sunny are both adoptees, which means that they carry a history related to another country. Hata is a Korean adoptee turns Japanese immigrant in America. Before he immigrates into the United States, he is a Korean who “spoke and lived as Japanese” (72). Hata’s experience is interwoven with the history of Korea under Japanese occupation before World War II. Sunny is “the product” of “a GI and a local bar girl” in Korea during the Korean War, brought to the United States through international adoption (204). In this respect, the juxtaposition of two types of adoptees and immigrants in a family helps to complicate our study of the practice of international adoption. The novel presents the adoptees’ lives as the convergence of three worlds: Korea, Japan, and America. Sunny’s bodily appearance becomes a space of the entangled history of the three countries. On one hand, Sunny’s “dark-hued skin” disillusion the adopter’s imagined “ready, natural affinity” between the adoptive parent and child (204). As Mark C. Jerng points out, the “dark-hued skin” turns Sunny into “a site for the overlapping and intertwining of multiple histories” and the adoption becomes an overlapping of “the history of Japanese colonization of Korea; the presence of the US army in Korea during the Korean War; the history of black-white relations and Japanese-white relations in the US” (59). On the other, for Hata, rescuing a little girl by bringing her from the “squalor of the orphanage.....to

<sup>54</sup> See <<http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/poems/a.gesture.life.html>>.

<sup>55</sup> As Lee points out in an interview on the book, Hata’s last words “come almost home” is “as home and homey as he could ever find.” See <<http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/poems/a.gesture.life.html>>.

an orderly, welcoming suburban home in America” demonstrates his competence as an American citizen (73). Sunny’s migration results from a binary opposition between Korea and the United States. The imagination of the squalor of orphanage in Hata’s mind and the orderly, welcoming home that he provides makes Korea an antithesis of America.

Thus, the recognition of the pre-existent, multiple layers of histories in Sunny implies how categorization and racialization are projected onto the adoptee because of her skin color. Along with Hata’s description of Sunny’s appearance, he not only reveals how racial images are projected onto the adoptee but also how the society forms the projection. The adoption begins with Hata’s expectation of natural bonding between two people of the same race. Hata expects to build such a bonding by having a daughter of “like-enough race;” that way his “colleagues and associates and neighbors, though knowing her to be adopted, would have little trouble quickly accepting our being of a single kind and blood”(204). To Hata, the bond is supposed to be recognized not by their affective interaction but by external looks.

For Hata, his common ancestry and expected resemblance with Sunny is what he relies on to build a new family and blend in with the community. In this regard, Sunny is not thought of as a person but as something to fill a void in his life. As Hata says, he hopes that Sunny’s arrival would “serve to mark the recommencement of my days” (74). For Hata, to provide financial security for Sunny becomes a moral justification for the transnational adoption. In Hata’s mind, Sunny is a needy object from “the squalor of the orphanage” and waiting to be transformed into a subject provided not only with economic protection but also social recognition. According to David Eng, being a parent is “a measure of value, self-worth, and ‘completion’” (7). Having a child creates a sense of belongingness for Hata in the community. In a sense, Hata becomes a fully realized political, economic, and social

subject through the adoption. In this respect, transnational adoption is socially effected from child to parent to form a full and robust citizenship. Just like joining the Japanese army is his gesture to become a real Japanese, having a family with a bonding based on “like-enough race” between parent and child is a passport for him to become a real American citizen (204).

In “Transnational Adoptees: Global Biopolitical Orphans or An Activist Community,” Natalie Cherot contends that international adoption is a practice of biopolitics because it is a control over life. According to Cherot, as Foucault defines biopolitics as “a state’s concern with the biological wellbeing of the population,” transnational adoption can be a unifying social force that “transform[s] Third World children into human subjects instilled with Western culture and values.”<sup>56</sup> The power within the biopolitics of international adoption works in a domain that manages crisis and trauma such as war and poverty to promote humanitarianism. Cherot argues that “through disciplining, categorizing, and socializing, both adoptees and adoptive families, international adoption institutions are collective actors that invoke real power and governance.” According to Cherot, during the Korean War, the U.S. military intervention framed and produced adoptees’ birth. However, under the discourses of biopolitics of transnational adoption, the children were constructed as “beneficiaries of US humanitarianism, US military, Western churches, and later adoption agencies” after the war. International adoption agencies are the site of biopolitical power because humans are managed, and being an adoptee is a racialized experience because Asian orphans’ bodies became governable through placement in white family.

In *A Gesture Life*, Hata’s hope to form a family with racial resemblance is based on an intention to produce an adoptive family that mimics a natural one. Before

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<sup>56</sup> See <<http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk/Cmach/Backissues/j008/Articles/cherot.htm> >

Sunny's arrival, to Hata the adoption is like a display in order to show how his family "would soon be well reputed and happily known" (204). However, Sunny's biological genealogy reveals through her skin forces him to face the uneasy "conceit" (204).

Hata is disappointed upon the first seeing Sunny because her hair and "her skin, were there to see, self-evident, and it was obvious how some other color (or colors) ran deep within her" (204). His attempt to have a "natural" bonding in his family through the practice of transnational adoption is undermined because the adoptee is racially mixed. To Sunny, being an adoptee is also a racialized experience because to her adoptive father, her skin color defines who she is. As Barbara Yngvesson argues, "Alienation from this source of likeness produces 'genealogical bewilderment'" (8).

The idea of having a family and a new beginning in life by transnational adoption is complicated since Sunny is a product of wars that reminds the adopter of his past.

The biopolitics of international adoption is made especially clear when Hata mentioned the control of comfort woman and the manipulation of the female body during the war. In "Political Economics of Passion: Transnational Adoption and Global Woman: Roundtable on Global Woman," David Eng argues that transnational adoptees play the role similar to that of "Global Woman."<sup>57</sup> "Global woman" refers to workers who are exploited for both their wage labor and their affective work. The term is related to the commodification of affects, emotions, and passions, all of which are the emotional labor that often accompanies the importation of physical labor from the global South to the global North within the logic of globalization, gender exploitation, and wage labor. According to Eng, scholarship in postcolonial and transnational feminism links the emergence of global woman to military prostitution. In this perspective, Eng also points out that military prostitution is one of the sources

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<sup>57</sup> The examples that Eng gives are nannies, maids, sex workers, nurses, migrant laborers, and mail-order brides.

of transnational adoptee and is therefore directly linked to transnational adoption. As what is revealed in *A Gesture Life*, during World War II, daughters in Korea were given away or taken away to serve as comfort women in the army, as what happened to K and her sister.<sup>58</sup> After the war, another generation of daughters in Korea is given away out of racial congeniality, stigma, and poverty. As the narrative seamlessly transits from present to past and back again, the novel explores the exploitation of women in terms of the experience of comfort woman and that of transnational adoptee. The control of life over the body of comfort woman and that over the female adoptees mirrors each other. The power of biopolitics oppressed woman and turned them into comfort woman by controlling the female body and forcing it into nothing but a tool for men to have sexual pleasure. Nowadays the brutality of oppressing woman and forcing them to be comfort woman is no longer exist; however, under the practice of transnational adoption, the power of biopolitics still exists. The female body from the third world has not yet been freed from the control. The “function” of the female body of the third world woman transforms from providing physical pleasure to offering emotional demand.

In the novel, it is obvious that the relationship between Hata and Sunny is partly colored by Hata’s experience with K. When talking about his relationship with Sunny, Mary Burns tells him that “you’re the one who wanted her. You adopt her. But

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<sup>58</sup> Comfort women were kidnapped and forced to become military sex slaves for the Japanese Imperial Army during the World War II years 1932-1946. “Many were young teenagers snatched from schoolyards. Others were lured with promises of lucrative jobs to feed hungry families. Some saw their families murdered before they were raped. Once in custody, they were taken to Japanese army bases ranging from the Siberian border to the South Pacific. Some endured rape up to 40 times a day. The rate of suicide was high. Women unable to work because of physical or emotional breakdown were quite literally destroyed, as a beast of burden would be. Only a quarter survived their ordeal.” For more detailed information regarding comfort women, see <<http://wibfrederick.org/pdfs/Comfort%20Women%20brochure.pdf>>.



you act almost guilty, as if she's someone you hurt once, or betrayed, and now you're obliged to do whatever she wishes" (60). When Sunny decides to leave Hata's house, she also tells Hata herself that "I never needed you. I don't know why, but you needed me. But it was never the other way" (96). These observations remind Hata of his experience with K. Hamilton Carroll argues that "Sunny is clearly meant to recuperate Hata by replacing his failure with Kkutaeh with a story of success" (609). Young-Oak Lee also points out that Hata is subject to his adopted nation and the gender ideology of the traditional patriarchal society; hence his possessive male ego has much to do with the idea of the woman's chastity. To Hata, K's sex can be something like what K describes, "a pelt or favorite stone" to him (300). And Hata also thinks that "if he cannot have K all to himself, he would rather have her dead" (151). The language of ownership turns K into an object for him to possess. Hamilton Carroll also points out that Hata describes K as an object such as a sculpture, a statue, and a house (603). From Hata's own experience, he has learnt to deny his past and origin and learnt to live as someone who he is not, a Japanese. He has never been recognized for who he is, a Korean, until he met K. Even though Hata denies his origin as a Korean, he feels drawn to her (240). Therefore, on one hand, he wants to be found or recognized by K; and on the other, he wants K for sex. Hence the help that Hata wants to offer is not only unwanted but also with an intention to possess her.

The language of ownership also sheds light on the similarity between the biopolitics of comfort woman and that of transnational adoption when Hata mentions his expectation for Sunny: "My Sunny, I thought, would do much the same. Not be so thankful or beholden to me, necessarily, but at least she'd be somewhat appreciative of the providence of institutions that brought her from the squalor of the orphanage" (73). Hata's stance and the language of ownership discloses how demanding he is of Sunny's gratitude. The idea that adoption would benefit Sunny is overturned by both

Mary Burns' and Sunny's observation regarding Hata's attitude to Sunny. As Dorow argues, "the simplistic assumption that a poor child in a developing country will have a preferred life with a family in a 'rich' country is misguided, imperialistic and over-looks the sacrifice and loss, not only to the sending country, but to the child" (17). Either way, Sunny's loss, as presented in Hata's narration, is overlooked, and unrecognized by Hata. Hata fails to recognize what Sunny needs and leaves Sunny to recuperate from her loss by herself. The protection offered to Sunny is limited; while she is instilled with economic stability and political rights in the western world, the practice of transnational adoption is devoid of emotional interaction. She is silenced not only because the adoptive father is the narrator, but also because she is not present to Hata. Young-Oak Lee argues that it is his obsession with K that drives him to adopt Sunny and that Sunny is K's substitute because the way Hata sets the rules and expects Sunny to obey is similar to the way that Hata acts as an agent of patriarchy to oppress K. Although the experience of the transnational adoptee is incomparable to the life of misery that is consigned to girls in sexual bondage, the control over the comfort women's bodies in the army can be compared to the movement of the female body in transnational adoption. The control is not only related to what Foucault refers to as a practice of biopolitics, people who are engaged in the control also becomes what Foucault calls "a vehicle of power" because they apply to "the mechanism of gender" to make their situation politically advantageous and useful.<sup>59</sup> The objectification of the comfort woman is similar to the objectification of the adoptee. After witnessing Sunny's "indecent move and behavior" in the Gizzi house which obviously violates the concept of chastity, Hata also renounces his care for Sunny by saying "I wish she were just another girl or woman to me, no longer my kin or my daughter or even my charge, and I made no sound as I grimly descended, my blood

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<sup>59</sup> See Young-Oak Lee's "Gender, Race, and the Nation in A Gesture Life," 147.

already trying to forget, growing cold” (116). To Hata, both the comfort woman and the female adoptee are sexual objects. Hence, out of the fear for being marked as failure, and also because he is not willing to see the “imminent disgrace and embarrassment that would hang about the house like banners of our mutual failure,” Hata facilitates the abortion of Sunny’s baby (340). It is obvious that the help that Hata tries to offer for the adoptee is again selfish and unwanted.

Either in the case of global woman or that of transnational adoptees, as Eng points out, “money is exchanged for a body that is commodified” (54). The fact behind Hata’s adoption of Sunny involves him bribing the adoption agency worker. When Hata thinks of the process of the adoption, what he regrets is not the fact that he bribes the adoption agent but that he loses his good judgment for the desire for a child. When Hata says that “ I brought a large donation to the agency, this beyond the regular expenses, as well as a like sum for the woman, which I explained as a most proper gift in my former homeland, and which would be followed by another,” it is clearly shown that the adoption is clouded with monetary exchange (73). The exchange of capital not only brings about Hata’s robust citizenship but also transforms Sunny into a commodity. She is bought into the family with an expectation to “serve to mark the recommencement” of his day (74). The commodification is reinforced because the agency allows Hata to choose the child before adoption when he rejects the agency’s arrangement of locating a boy for him and insists on having a daughter. The description of the merchandise in transnational adoption is shocking in the sense that it is revealed in a very plain way as if the capitalist exchange is necessary and normal. In fact, the illicit relationship between money and transnational adoption is one that has become an issue in the “reform” of transnational adoption. But when Hata discloses the bribery behind the adoption, the description reveals the lack of reflection on the adopters’ intention in transnational adoption.

In *A Gesture Life*, the family made of two generations of adoptees offers the reader a crucial insight into the adoption agencies as sites of bio-politics. Both as Asian Americans, Doc Hata stands for the generation of the model minorities who make efforts in sustaining life conditions and who are willing to be assimilated into US. Different from Hata, Sunny, is brought to the country as a privileged immigrant. According to Trenka's study, "Aside from the cultural and economic elite, adopted children have become the only people in the world who can so easily flow over the boundaries of nation-states because they have been rendered into commodities instead of people."<sup>60</sup> The exchange that is offered to Sunny is a trade off between a new life and a departure from her homeland. Hence the practice of transnational adoption transfers the focus on Sunny's sadness when she first arrives into a focus on the adoptive parent's joy in starting a new life. Chang-rae Lee makes it clear in the adoption story that Sunny is both an object of desire and protection, and adoption is a practice of both commodification and care, both market and rescue. As Sara Dorow points out, the transnational adoptees "are not bought and sold, but neither are they given and received freely and altruistically" (17). The idea of adoption plays a role that both saves and consumes the children. The double-sidedness can never be ignored when we considered the practice of transnational adoption. Moreover, in order to achieve "the best interests for children," the practice should work more on the side of saving children than on consuming children. As the studies of Jane Jeong Trenka, E. J. Graff, Peter Selman, Shihning Chou, Kevin Borwne, and Melanie Kirkaldy suggest, eliminating the monetary incentive is the first step to avoid consuming children.

Also, in most adoption narratives, the origin has always played an important

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<sup>60</sup> See <[http://www.conducivemag.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=82:transnational-adoption-and-the-financialization-of-everything4569&catid=38:innovative-thinking&Itemid=61](http://www.conducivemag.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=82:transnational-adoption-and-the-financialization-of-everything4569&catid=38:innovative-thinking&Itemid=61)>

part in adoptees' search for identity. In *A Gesture Life*, the past of the two adoptees is mostly absent. On one hand, there is little talk on Doc Hata's origin because he thinks that his Korean past is shameful. He not only does not explore his Korean family tie, but he also denies it. On the other hand, Sunny's past is absent because it is nearly blank in the adoptive father's narration. The void of past in Hata's telling is not because the past is not important, but because it is both so important and influential that he has to cut it off from his present life, for fear that this present life might crumble. However, reading Hata's experience with K and the experience of adoption simply as an explanation of his sense of un-belongingness is to assume a consumption of the experience of comfort woman and transnational adoption in the novel. It is consumption because the experience serves only as an explanation of Hata's sense of un-belongingness. In my opinion, the novel is not just about how hard it is for Asian Americans to be accepted but also about the difficulties that adoptees might encounter in their life in the adoptive country. As the story is told by an unreliable narrator who always make excuses for himself, the writing of the experience of transnational adoption reveals that "the truth .... is not something that can be so clear" (328).

*A Gesture Life* provides a re-examination of the intricate relationship between sending and receiving countries, between former colonized and colonizing countries. The replacement of adoptees from one country to another makes a contrast, like squalor and suitable home for the adoptee, between these countries. In a certain sense, while the adopters probably intend to reinforce the competence of citizenship through parenthood in adoption, it is this contrast that bolsters adopters' and agencies' speech of rescuing children. Moreover, Hata's storytelling also reminds us of the fact that our societies still assume adoptees' racial genealogy based on their appearance, which turns their body into a site interwoven with histories in people's eyes. Transnational adoption is thus the practice of biopolitics, a social regulation of the body of the

population. In terms of Lee's representation, the experience of transnational adoptees can be compared to that of the comfort women and the help offered by Hata can be considered as selfish and unwanted. As what is presented in *A Gesture Life*, if the children's past and their origin are deliberately ignored, and they are placed in a family without paying any attention to the racial differences between adopters and adoptees, a sense of un-belongingness is very likely to surface. The past plays an important role in the present, and it is also a critical aspect for adoptees to deal with in their life. Therefore, helping children without considering their origin and situation after the placement, the process of migration of the female body might only turns the transnational adoptees into, as presented in *A Gesture Life*, nothing more than an object to furnish the house.



## Chapter Four: Conclusion

Both *The Language of Blood* and *A Gesture Life* present counternarratives to dominant transnational adoption narratives which mostly emphasize the point that transnational adoption is equal to social benefit for children and a practice of humanitarianism, love, generosity, and morality. In *The Language of Blood*, the adoptee is bitter about being taken away from her birth family. Trenka directly questions the practice of transnational adoption by giving her life experience as an example. In *A Gesture Life*, there is a tension between the narrator's nonchalance to the practice of transnational adoption and the impact of the experience on the adoptee. In other words, Chang-rae Lee does not question transnational adoption by confronting the practice directly. By describing how the practice is taken for granted and normalized as a strategy to deal with one's own situation, *A Gesture Life* questions what makes transnational adoption necessary.

In this thesis, I intend to provide an examination of the representations of transnational adoption in order to argue that there is an urgent need to educate people about what is involved and at stake in the practice of transnational adoption. Without counternarratives such as the two texts we have studied here, people would not know what transnational adoption is about. The master narrative of transnational adoption has been the main source of information about what is comes to the issue of transnational adoption, which is often misleading, overly general and fails to provide a well-rounded understanding of the life of adoptees and their adoptive and birth parents. In this respect, I have attempted to carry out a study of the social, cultural, and political background of the practice and examine *The Language of Blood* and *A Gesture Life* in order to suggest a rethinking of the practice. In the first chapter, the historical and cultural review of transnational adoption shows that Christianity, American optimism, the demand for children in the receiving countries, the

patriarchal ideology and the lack of social welfare in the sending countries are the main factors in transnational adoption. The review also points out that practice of transnational adoption is closely connected to politics, social issues, and cultural context. However, experiences of transnational adoption can never be generalized.

Moreover, the examination of the representations in the texts in Chapter Two and Three reveals the necessity of reforming the practice of transnational adoption. Jane Jeong Trenka points out in “Transnational Adoption and the ‘Financialization of Everything’” that the reform of intercountry adoption often relies on eliminating the monetary incentive that has driven the practice. Once the monetary factor is eliminated, the mass transnational adoption would dwindle and the flow of “financialization” would be directed to real social welfare and family preservation. As Trenka says, “Transnational adoption as it is practiced today is a business that exists in a world of global capitalism where anything—including brides, sex slaves, and the children of vulnerable mothers—can be purchased for the right amount of money.”<sup>61</sup> And the link between money and transnational adoption is largely ignored in the public thinking of sending countries. Shihning Chou, Kevin Borwne, and Melanie Kirkaldy’s study shows that “only four percent of the children in institutions are ‘true’ biological orphans with both parents deceased” (22). Peter Selman also argues that there is always an adoption market because the pressures on poor parents will continue as long as money is allowed to play a part. In this regard, E. J. Graff’s study on orphan crisis indicates that international adoption has become an industry driven by cash and the fact is that if money is removed from adoption chain, the number of healthy babies needing Western homes would very possibly drop and even disappear.

In the dominant narrative, while the truth is never said, and is unlikely for

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<sup>61</sup> See <[http://www.conducivemag.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=82:transnational-adoption-and-the-financialization-of-everything4569&catid=38:innovative-thinking&Itemid=61](http://www.conducivemag.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=82:transnational-adoption-and-the-financialization-of-everything4569&catid=38:innovative-thinking&Itemid=61)>



us to hear, what we can rely on is not what is said but what is done. This is also the measure that Chang-rae Lee takes in representing transnational adoption through his novel. *A Gesture Life* is different from *The Language of Blood* because it is not a first-hand autobiographical novel written by adopters or adoptees. However, like *The Language of Blood*, *A Gesture Life* reveals the deficiency of the master narrative of transnational adoption because it deals with the dark secrets which have long been sugar-coated with the rhetoric of “gift,” “save,” and “rescue.” While I do not want to deny the benevolence of people who want to help children and give them what they deserve in their life, neither do I intend to view the practice of transnational adoption solely as an act of selfishness, ignorance, gullibility, and pretentiousness of human beings. Instead, I aim to question the practice in terms of the counternarratives such as *The Language of Blood* and *A Gesture Life* to demand the needed concern for the issues of monetary circulation, commodification and exploitation of adoptees, and a reform of transnational adoption. Not only do we have to avoid “consuming” children by eliminating capitalist exchange, we also have to consider whether the practice is really needed. Sending children to another country is not necessarily the only way to deal with the problem of domestic violence or poverty. Considering the issues such as racism and the sense of un-belongingness that transnational adoptees might encounter after being replaced in another country, enhancing domestic social welfare in order to help the children to stay in their own country and culture can be actually a better option to save children. This can be done through education for people to have well-rounded knowledge of transnational adoption and thus enable a rethinking in society. Through the study of these two texts, what we have to always bear in mind is that *The Language of Blood* is not just a memoir of an unfortunate adoptee, neither should we take the representation of transnational adoption in *A Gesture Life* as just a fictional account of the actual practice. Through *The Language of Blood*, we see the

adoptee writes to fight against the language of master narrative of transnational adoption. Also, while most critics focus on the representation of the experience of comfort women in *A Gesture Life*, my examination of the text here focuses on the experience of transnational adoption and the power of biopolitics within it. The counternarratives of the texts not only reflect the fact that the practice of transnational adoption needs to be reformed, but they also remind us that, most important of all, the ultimate goal of transnational adoption should always be done with the consideration of the best interests for children and of reducing the manipulation over female bodies.



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