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# On Asian Transnational Adoptees' Self-Determination for Cultural Identification:
## An Analysis of Greg Leitich Smith's Novel, Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo

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**ABSTRACT**

Transnational adoption from Asian countries to the US started in the 1950s. When Asian transnational adoptees first came to the US, they were encouraged to assimilate into white American cultures because many were adopted by white Americans, yet due to the spread of the ideal of incorporating adoptees' ethnic background in parenting for the adoptees' healthy identity development in the US, white parents have started encouraging their adopted children to know their Asian cultural roots. While white parents are trying to give their adopted children either American culture or Asian culture, what do Asian adoptees feel about their cultural identification? Isn't it Asian adoptees themselves who need to decide their cultural identification?

This article examines these questions by reading Greg Leitich Smith's *Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo* from interdisciplinary perspectives. Combining the literary texts and the findings of adoption research in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and psychology, this article concludes that while white adoptive parents need to provide cultural experiences of their adopted children's birth culture to their children, it is Asian transnational adoptees themselves who have the right to decide their cultural identification.

## 1. Background Review

Transnational adoption of Asian children has been practiced for more than 70 years in the US, however, research on them from interdisciplinary perspectives is not done enough. Chiaki Moriguchi points out that adoption research is "found almost exclusively in the fields of demography, child psychology, and family sociology" (Moriguchi, 2012).

Each discipline offers insightful findings about adoptees, but these findings do not address the complexity of adoptees' lives due to the limit of its research scope. Interdisciplinary research methods allow to connect the shortcomings of single-discipline research. Especially, incorporating literature written by an adoptee gives us more convincing ideas on the complex lives of adoptees, which are not fully discussed by non-adoptee scholars. In this regard, this

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article could contribute to the development of adoption research in its interdisciplinary approach.

Further, adoption research in the US in the 1970s and 1980s was mainly conducted by white scholars, and their main focus was to examine to what extent non-white adoptees adjusted to white culture. Citing representative adoption research scholars in the 1970s and 1980s such as Rita Simon, Howard Alstein, Charles Zastrow, Kim Park Nelson, an anthropologist researching on Korean transnational adoption, and herself Korean transnational adoptee, writes that their adoption research is "deeply flawed studies" (Nelson, 2016). She finds these studies flawed and discusses the problems of the research by white scholars as follows:

> It fails to place transracial adoption within the social and historical context of lived racial and class hierarchies, to acknowledge the subjugation of birth mothers of color, or to debate the consequences of racial and cultural assimilation (Nelson, 2016).

She therefore insists the importance of adoption research that incorporates the real voices of adoptees themselves. This article reads the real voice of Asian adoptee in Greg Leitich Smith's *Ninjas,* Piranhas*, and Galileo*, and argues the issues of cultural assimilation of Asian adoptees from the adoptee's viewpoints.

This article thus marks difference from the existing adoption research in the following points: 1) it uses interdisciplinary research approach; 2) it incorporates the real voice of Asian adoptee.

## 2. Transnational Adoption in the US: History and Issues

Despite the pandemic, the US adopted 1622 children transnationally in the fiscal year 2020 according to the Annual Report on Intercountry Adoption issued by the Department of State. 659 children out of 1622, roughly 40% of children are from Asian countries such as China, South Korea, India, the Philippines, etc. The US' intercountry adoption started in the 1950s and hit its height in 2004. The country adopted about 23,000 children in the same year (Niall, 2016). Since then, the number of intercountry adoption has been decreasing for various reasons, but the practice has tenaciously continued.

Reasons behind the decrease of intercountry adoption include the accusations of baby selling, and other problematic child adoption practices have led some sending countries to shutter their programs (Graff, 2011). Neverthelss, the practice has continued, and transnationally adopted childrenby American adoptive parents need to adjust to their new life in the US.

Antony Blinken, Secretary of the State mentions in "the Annual Report on Intercountry Adoption" that "we strongly believe that intercountry adoption must remain a viable option for these children when it is in their best interests. ("Annual Report" 2021)" On the other hand, some critics point out the sytematic problems of intercountry adoption. For example, E.J.Graff contends,

> The international adoption industry has become a market often driven by its customers. Prospective adoptive parents in the United States will pay adoption agencies between $15,000 and $35,000 (excluding travel, visa costs, and other miscelaneous expenses) for the chance to bring home a little one (Graff, 2011).

Graff continues her ctiricism that because some Westerners pay lots of money for adoption, the adoption has become a profittable industry in developing countries. For money, some people in developing countries even kidnap infants, and even some medical doctors force poor mothers to give up their babies in exchange of medical fees (Graff, 2011). In adoption, children in needs such as "sick, disabled, traumatized, or older than five" (Graff, 2011) are the ones who should

be adopted, but prospective American parents only request healthy toddlers. Due to these inhuman practices involving intercountry adoption, some sending countries stop intercountry adoption.

Although Blinken writes that intercountry adoption is for the "best interests" of children in need , some transnational adoptees have started voicing their pain as transnational adoptees. For example, 30 Korean transnational adoptees and 10 birth mothers hosted a rally in 2007. They demanded Korean government (South Korea is one of the bigest adoptee sending countries in Asia) to stop adoption because "overseas adopption leaves deep-rooted scars both on the birth mothers and the children" (Kim Young-gyo, 2011). Thus, obviously, transnational adoption is not for the best interests of some Asian transnational adoptees.

What kind of deep-rooted scars does intercountry adoption leave in the mind of adoptees? Sherrie Eldridge, herself an adoptee and adoption counselor, writes the pain of adoptees.

> Many adoptees feel false guilt over the painful loss of the birth family, over which they had no control. They often feel guilty just for being alive, and they cringe when they hear the words illegimate or bastard (Eldridge, 1999).

In addition to the pain of the loss of the birth family, some Asian transnational adoptees are troubled by their race. Most Asian children are adopted by white parents. Theyfeel pain when they realize their racial difference from their adoptive white parents.

Nelson explains that from the 1960s to the 1980s, white adoptive parents used to expect their Asian transnational adoptees not to be marred by racial difference, but their color-blind attitude was actually forcing their adopted children to assimilate into white cultural norms. Nelson writes,

> In a society where the dominant culture is White and non-White are of-color, to have no race is effectively to be White. Parents who described themselves or their children as raceless were likely attempting to protect their families from the difficulties of difference, but in creating an imaged racelessness, they were unwittingly Whitewashing their children (Nelson, 2016).

Asian transnational adoptees are trying to assimilate into white norms because of their white parents' expectation, but it is obvious that they cannot be white. While some Asian transnational adoptees may be embraced as white in their household, they are constantly racialized as Asians outside of the house. Some even experience racism in American society. For example, Russ Mitchell reports the experience of racism Asian adoptees go through and white parents' indifference to it in her interview with Amber Field, an Asian adoptee from South Korea.

> Field didn't get much support from their white mother when bullied at school. [Field says] "If I told her about things that were happening to me, she'd say, Oh, ignore it, stop your whining, everyone gets teased, no one likes a victim. There's a way that she can't really hold racism." For many white people, whiteness is a norm to which other races should conform or aspire to, and don't much think about what it means to be white (Mitchell, 9).

This incongruence between the house and society, between their true skin color and parents' imagined skin color of theirs causes pain in the mind of Asian transnational adoptees.

Some Asian transnational adoptees report the pain deriving from identity problems. For example, Jane Jeong Trenka, herself an Asian transnational adoptee raised in Minnesota, writes

of her identity problem arising from her racial difference from her white parents in her novel, *The Language of Blood.*

> I wanted my head to be removed, a metaphor so strong that only later did I realize that it was not a death wish at all. I dreamed about it, fantasized about it, imagined the mercy of a guillotine. My body was separated from my mind in a dualism so ridiculous that I almost flew apart at the shoulders. What I longed for was wholeness, for my body to be as white and northern Minnesota as my mind (Trenka, 2003).

Because of the difference between her imagined self (=white) and her real body (=Asian), some Asian transnational adoptees develop behavioral and mental problems. Child psychological development experts Karyn Purvis etc., lists the adoptees' problematic behaviors such as irritability, antisocial behaviors, anger, rage, aggression, dissociation, withdrawal, crying, sadness, lethargy, and depression (Purvis, 2007).

In order to ease adoptees from their pain, some scholars point out the importance of incorporating Asian transnational adoptees' cultural origin in their everyday life for their healthy identity development. A psychologist Richard Lee writes,

> Adoptive parents who deny or overlook racial and ethnic differences between parents and child, for example, may be more likely to engage in cultural assimilation parenting strategies, which in turn, may contribute to poorer mental health. By contrast, adoptive parents who acknowledge and accept racial and ethnic differences may be more likely to engage in enculturation and racial inoculation parenting strategies, which in turn, may contribute to more positive racial/ethnic identity development and mental health (Lee, 2003).

The knowledge about how to nurture Asian transnational adoptees' healthy identity development has spread among adoptive parents, and Shohei's parents, a protagonist of Greg Leitich Smith's *Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo*, are not exception. Next, I will read the text and discuss Asian transnational adoptees' problems of their cultural identification.

## 3. Analysis of Greg Leitich Smith's Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo

Set in Chicago, *Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo* has three seventh-grade narrators, Honoria, Elias and Shohei. They have been good friends but their friendship becomes awkward when Elias has a crush on Honoria, who has a crush on Shohei. Shohei wants to help Elias so that Honoria will like him. The novel offers an interesting coming-of-age story, but this paper focuses only on Shohei and his relationship with his Irish American adoptive parents.

Shohei is a Japanese boy who was adopted by Irish Americans. Shohei reflects the author himself to some extent. Smith has a Japanese-German mixed race background, adopted, and raised in Chicago. The book illustrates the awkward relationship between Shohei and his adoptive parents, and is a good material to consider the issue of Asian trassnational adoptees' cultural identification.

Shohei's adoptive parents are wealthy Irish Americans. They are conscientious devoting parents, who want to give the best to Shohei. One day, his adoptive mother read an article "The Urgency of Exposing Cross-Culturally Adopted Children to the Ancestral Cultures of their Biological Parents" in *the Journal of Cultural Wellness and Pediatric Anthropology*. The article is of course fictional. It encourages adoptive parents to provide adopted children's original culture to their children. Being influenced by the article, Shohei's parents suddenly started "Japanization effort" (Smith, 2003) for Shohei's sake. As noted before, experts on

adoptees' psychological development contends that it is necessary for adoptive parents to provide the adoptees' racial and ethnic culture in their daily lives so they could grow "positive racial/ethnic identity development and mental health" (Lee, 2003). Shohei's parents realized that raising Shohei in white American culture is not enough for his healthy mental growth, and started giving Shohei Japanese culture.

The parents' Japanization efforts include to cook Japanese food every day (Smith, 2003), socializing with other Asian transnational adoptees, to have Shohei take Japanese-culture-related classes, and to decorate Shohei's room with Japanese items as follows:

> Now, a bunch of three-foot-by-three-foot tatami mats covered the floor and one wall had a wood-framed grid of rice paper. My bed had been replaced with this tatami thing that looked kind of like a coffee table, and the rest of the furniture was sort of short and came from Olaf of the Orient: A Fusion of West and East. Oh, and my framed and autographed World Cup soccer and Chicago Cubs posters had been replaced by a bamboo scroll and a silk print of a big wave with Mount Fuji in the background (Smith, 2003).

A sociologist Heather Jacobson calls the adoptive parents' efforts to incorporate their adopted children's original culture into their daily lives "culture keeping." She explains culture keeping as follows:

> Culture keeping is framed as a mechanism for facilitating a solid ethnic identity and sense of self-worth in children who may experience difficulties because of their racial, ethnic, and adoptive statuses. Culture keeping is meant to replicate the cultural education internationally adopted children would receive if they were being raised within a family of their own ethnic heritage. It is meant to help mitigate some of the challenges of living in an interracial and ethnically diverse family formed across national borders (Jacobson, 2).

Shohei's parents are trying to give Shohei Japanese culture, which he cannot acquire in the US. Yet, the parents' Japanization efforts baffle Shohei. He tells his parents about his bewilderment

> I'm interested in Japan and stuff, which is why I'm still taking Nihongo as my Asian language elective, but I like a lot of other things, too. Besides, it's not like I'm genetically programmed to worship the emperor, or anything (Smith, 2003).

To this, Shohei describes his mother's reaction: "My mom got a little teary and clasped my hands in hers." And she says "Your ancestors are speaking to you." She continues "We're going to help you hear" (Smith, 2003). Shohei is upset by the adoptive mother's extreme attempt to Japanize him but, he reluctantly accepts her efforts.

Some Asian transnational adoptees tend to accept their adoptive parents' expectation docilely and suppress their true feeling. It is because they were saved by benevolent white American parents and they need to appreciate the kindness. Asian transnational adoptees, Julia Chinyere Opara, Sun Yung Shin, and Jane Jeong Trenka explain this "self-censorship" tendency of Asian transnational adoptees as follows:

> Some of us feel pressured to censor our own pain as an act of loyalty toward our adoptive families, fearing that it would cause them too much pain if we express our feelings of loss and grief (Opara, Shin, and Trenka, 2006).

Shohei may hesitate to hurt his adoptive parents' feeling so he cannot reject their Japanization efforts. He is sad when his adoptive parents replaced his cherished sport club posters with Japanese scrolls, but he supresses his true feeling. He talks to himself that "I was supposed to be celebrating, or whatever, my Japanese heritage. But my parents had never let me decide what that meant" (Smith, 2003).

Shohei does not deny his Japanese roots, but he is troubled by the fact that it is not himself but his parents who decide his cultural identification. Shohei is old enough to decide what he likes and dislikes. While he enjoys watching Godzila movies, he also enjoys watching Chicago Cubs games. However, his parents do not allow Shohei's self-decision.

Even though transnational adoption experts say that it is important to incorporate children's Asian roots in their everyday life for their healthy cultural identity development, if parents force Asian culture to children, which may be the same structure of forcing white culture to Asian transnational adoptees.

Towards the end of the novel, Shohei finally stands up against the parents' Japanization efforts. He talks to his adoptive parents,

> Lots of things are part of me. Japan. America. Chicago. Ireland…sort of. Soccer. My friends. Mathilda. Being adopted. I just want to be the one who gets to choose what the parts are and what they mean (Smith, 2003).

To this, his parents show their understanding to Shohei's true feeling. *Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo* tells us readers that adoptive parents need to provide the rich cultural experiences of their original culture to their children, but it is Asian transnational adoptees themselves who have the right to decide their cultural identification.

## 4. Conclusion

Since most white American adoptive parents have no racialized experiences of being racial minority, they seem to be either take color-blind attitude to their adopted children, which results in whitewashing children, or overemphasizing children's Asian roots. Some Asian transnational adoptees seem to be upset between the two extreme choices. Yet, *Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo* offers another view, which is that Asian transnational adoptees should choose their cultural identification more than just either white or Asian.

Kristen Hoo-Mi Sloth, a Korean transnational adoptee raised in Norway contends that "no ideal identity formation process exists" (Sloth, 2006) for Asian transnational adoptees, but she continues that there are Asian transnational adoptees who "have a relaxed, flexible attitude to ethnicity and cultural belonging. […They are] open to new influences and stress individual identity more than national identity" (Sloth, 2006).

Shohei voices that his cultural identification consists of Japan, America, Ireland, Chicago, friends, soccer, etc. He is developing flexible identity, which is not simply bound by ethnic identity. What adoptive parents could do may be to respect children's self-determination for their cultural identification, and provide resources which can nurture children's self-esteem. In this way, Asian transnational adoptees may develop healthy and happy cultural identity.

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