



## HOMELAND TOURS: THE ISSUES AND THE CHALLENGES

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“I remember landing in Korea. As I came off the plane, the host-greeter said softly, ‘Welcome home!’ I looked out at the sea of faces, and they were all my face . . . everywhere I beheld my face . . . and they were beautiful faces!”

With these words, a Korean-American adoptee recalls the Homeland Tour experience of having her breath taken away by first impressions and that initial sense of belonging. Indeed, a trip to one’s “homeland” is enormously evocative, especially for an adoptee, and such tours are increasingly becoming part of the international adoptive family’s repertoire. Such families are usually inculcated early on with the belief that showing respect for the child’s culture of origin is of utmost importance. Popular ways to do so include special holiday celebrations, ethnic cuisine, language study, and culture camps. Each family develops its own style, and adoptive parents are often remarkably creative in finding ways to weave the child’s cultural heritage into family life.

During the last several decades, the “Homeland Tour” (also variously known as “Birth Land Tour,” “Motherland Tour,” and “Native Land Tour”) has become the sine qua non of understanding one’s roots; indeed, many consider it a rite of passage that will allow an individual to claim with genuine pride his or her dual heritage. Most often associated with Korean adoption, these tours annually attract hundreds of parents and children. Trips to China, Colombia, India, Thailand, and other countries have also been organized and will, no doubt, continue to reflect international adoption trends. Such trips are generally undertaken with careful planning, with many hopes and dreams, and often with some trepidation, as well. Among the questions frequently asked by adoptive parents are: What is the best age for a young person to go on the tour? Should parents accompany their child? Is a group tour preferable to a family tour? Can birth children come along? What kind of preparation do we need for the tour? As adoption agencies acquire experience with Homeland Tours, a body of knowledge is gradually emerging from which some modest lessons may be learned. This article explores in a beginning way some of the special issues and challenges presented by the Homeland Tour experience.

The tours with which I have been associated reflect the current trend toward having children travel at a younger age, while also including parents on the trip. On one trip to Korea, the youngest participant was 8-1/2 years old, while on Barker’s 2005 trip to Colombia, the youngest person was 11 years old. On some tours, the oldest adopted person has been only 16-1/2, while on others it is commonplace to see young people ages 20-25 signing up. Some observers have suggested that adoptees who are at least in their early 20’s when they travel back will have more appreciation for the country and more pride in their heritage. It is true that when

participants are pre-teens or young adolescents, most parents do not expect their children to experience the trip as an epiphany or at some profound level; rather, most parents view the trip as foundational, laying the groundwork for the future. Less emphasis is placed on “search,” and the themes and preparation are much different than if an adoptee were anticipating meeting birth parents. To go straight to the birth parent experience without a foundational trip places extraordinary psychological pressure on the average young person. During Homeland Tours, young people have had meaningful experiences, such as visiting the international adoption agency or orphanage; reuniting with foster families; visiting cities of birth; meeting physicians and midwives who delivered them; receiving additional information from their files; participating in “presentation ceremonies” in Colombia as new parents received their child; or personally helping escort Korean-born babies to the United States and into the waiting arms of adoptive parents. These experiences help the young people understand more fully the adoption process through which they themselves once became part of a permanent, loving family.

Is there a bottom-line age for participation? Allowing for developmental and gender differences, most parents with whom I worked felt that children under the age of ten missed quite a lot of the trip’s intent, though still experiencing the trip as positive. As Brodzinski and others have noted, children at the end of the “middle childhood” stage are less concrete and more reflective than those in the earlier years of this stage. Yet parents liked the idea of traveling earlier rather than later. One father commented: “The sooner you go on the trip, the sooner you can incorporate more of the culture into family life. Now if something is on the news about Korea, my daughter and I can really relate to it.” Furthermore, by having the experience at an earlier age, the adoptees are able to feel more “normal” by having what everyone else seems to have, namely, as much information as possible, as early as possible.

Traveling earlier rather than later obviously dictates that in most cases at least one parent will also go on the tour. Some have argued that parents must not be so overly involved that they interfere with the adoptee’s finding his/her own destiny. Yet parental accompaniment also has many salutary effects – sometimes even for older participants -- not the least of which is offering the safety net of the family during a challenging time. A 20-year-old girl traveling back to Colombia in the mid-1990’s found that her initial dismay at sharing the trip with her mother changed to relief: “I wanted to feel like this was my own personal journey, and yet I wanted to know she was there. I needed her there to support me, especially during the first week.” Furthermore, children often harbor the notion that any curiosity about their roots means they are somehow ungrateful or disloyal to their adoptive family. This fear is diminished when parent and child are fellow travelers, for the child sees the parent valuing the culture and affirming the search. This shared experience has the potential to draw the adoptive parent and the child closer. Finally, when parents travel with their children, they tend to send a message not only to their children but also to the country; this message has been articulated in another context by Lindy Gelber, founder of Camp Sejong, who suggests that “Korea has not lost these children, it has gained their families.”

Traveling in a group has strong appeal for most pre-teens and young adults (regardless of adoptive/non-adoptive status). They value the group support and the feeling of shared, normative experiences. Peer relationships loom large at this age, and being with others who share the international adoption experience protects from self-consciousness and, therefore, frees them to be more fully engaged. While the tours have an American presence about them that is readable, young people still report feeling less conspicuous with a tour group than they might with only their family unit. Thus, many Homeland Tour participants feel that they perhaps enjoyed the best of both worlds: having a group or clique of peers, but also having the “protection” of parents, albeit “walking half a block behind us.” Since adoption issues are inevitably part of the trip, traveling with other adoptees may also be helpful in de-personalizing the fact of relinquishment and seeing that their experience is not unique. While the group experience is usually helpful, nonetheless, some older and/or more introspective adoptees may prefer more privacy. As one young person commented: “I had too much to deal with to worry about interacting with people all the time. This was a very emotional time for me. I wanted more solitude and more down-time than offered by the typical tour.” Thus, individual preferences can never be overlooked.

The size of tour groups varies widely. The Homeland Tour groups with which I have been associated started small in size, with 20-25 participants, counting adoptees, parents, and grandparents. In recent years, the number of tour participants has grown to 35-40. As further growth is experienced, it is often necessary to add additional staff support, and to divide participants into multiple groups to keep size manageable and the service personalized. Some of the oldest adoption agencies in the U.S. now sponsor several Homeland Tours each summer, in order to be responsive to the increasing requests for such services.

Parents often wonder whether to take siblings along. If two children were adopted from the same country, or if the family composition includes a birth child, parents may deliberate about how many children to take. For birth children, such tours may enlarge their sensibilities about what it means to be a global family, though unquestionably they will experience the trip on a much different level than those who joined the family by adoption. Furthermore, common sense dictates that if there are much younger siblings in a family, it may be unwise to bring them, for the average tour is fairly rigorous, and a young child’s needs might also interfere with parent availability to the child who is the presumed focus of the trip. In all cases, parents need to be good listeners, for the adoptee often has strong feelings one way or the other about the inclusion of siblings, while birth children may also weigh in with strong emotions. Budgetary constraints, individual family dynamics, and agency/tour philosophy will all impact the decision.

The agenda for homeland trips almost always includes at least two foci, one cultural and the other adoption-related. Adequate preparation is needed for each of these agendas if the trip is to be a truly positive experience. Preparation for the cultural piece is similar to that undertaken by any thoughtful family when they are about to experience immersion in another culture. Such planning generally includes advance study of maps, guide books, historical and political articles, and a familiarizing of oneself with the currency and monetary system. Also crucial is a careful understanding of rules of etiquette governing a particular country, so as to conduct oneself in ways appropriate to the cultural setting. In Korea, for example, it is important

to realize that gifts are not opened by the recipient in front of the giver, or to know that it would be considered rude to turn one's back on someone while saying goodbye. Although younger participants do not generally undertake intensive language study, most desire to master rudimentary conversational phrases. Participants on tours to Latin American countries find that computer home language programs enable them fairly quickly to acquire a repertoire of basic Spanish phrases. Some families extend themselves a bit further; for example, one father and daughter preparing for a tour found that several summer months of studying Hangul at the Korean Embassy gave them a certain comfort level in the country, while also demonstrating respect for the culture. Experience would seem to point to the wisdom of more rather than less language study, since participants consistently observe that language can separate much more than they expected, especially when the agenda is not just sight-seeing but trying to reconnect with one's past.

If the cultural issues require thoughtful advance planning, preparation for the adoption focus requires even more careful preparation. One exercise which can serve as a bridge between the tourist planning concerns (where am I going?) and the adoption issues (who am I?) is to post a large map of the country and help each young person locate with a pin or name-tag the city in which he or she was born. In a transitional way, this activity moves the group consciously but non-threateningly toward distinguishing this trip as different from any other journey. Yes, I will be a tourist, but the theme of this trip goes well beyond the family cross-country trip we took last year in the old station wagon or SUV. Yes, I am locating a city on a map, but this city is not where some monument is located or where the finest souvenirs are to be found; this "place" is not mere geography, but the place of my birth. Indeed, this is a trip that will reconnect young persons with a past they often cannot remember except in sensory impressions or screen memories, but about which they generally have had a rich fantasy life.

In working with Homeland Tour participants, I have found the medium of small groups most helpful (separate groups for parents and children). Typically, two orientation groups were held prior to the summer departure; we met again in September to de-brief and synthesize. Supplemental one-on-one counseling was available through the agency both before and after the trip. The children were afforded the opportunity to examine the themes and issues important to them. Most stated that their parents had initiated the idea of the journey, and many of them were at first reluctant travelers. Within the group context, many fears were shared. Some were experiencing recurrent dreams that the plane would crash; one girl feared she would slide off the plane's emergency exit ramp only to find herself engulfed in an ocean of sharks. Another young woman dreamed that she was bitten by an exotic fly and lacked the proper inoculation. Still another girl worried that although it wasn't "cool" to walk too close to one's parents, what if she became separated from her parents while there? Several participants on tours to Colombia and Korea expressed fear of being kidnapped by strangers; one expressed the fear that her birth parent might see her on the street and kidnap her, while yet acknowledging that this was an irrational fear. Without question, the most commonly shared fear on several tours to Korea was that a full-scale war would break out between North and South Korea during the Homeland Tour, and that the children would be "unable to get back to our home" (emphasis mine). Within the safety of our small groups, all these fears could be expressed, acknowledged, and worked through, so that the trip might ultimately be viewed as less frightening.

We role-played our way through many of the cultural situations and adoption-related issues the children would encounter. Nowhere was this exercise more important than in reference to the visit to a maternity home, where an interpreter was to facilitate the exchange. The adoptees dress-rehearsed the dialogue they anticipated with birth mothers who were considering adoption. As they alternated the roles of birth parent and adoptee, many were beginning to put themselves in the birth parents' position and show appropriate empathy. They also anticipated being asked if they were happily adopted and well-adjusted in America. After returning, the families frequently wanted to reflect more on this experience than on any other. The older teens and their parents found the visits with birth mothers at maternity homes (at Esther's Home in Korea, and at the Hogar, the Marguerite D'Youville Home in Colombia) to be extremely poignant. The visit helped them gain new insights into why a birth parent might choose adoption for her child. One boy later suggested to his mother that he wanted to send the maternity home residents some postcards. His mother thought he meant souvenir postcards, but he corrected her, explaining that he wanted to send them blank postcards so that they could write to their birth children after placement. From group discussions with the adoptees, it was clear that they had gained fresh insights regarding the birth parent perspective.

Parents or tour organizers are sometimes tempted to prescribe uniform activities for participants. Yet, because children have different temperaments and varying talents, it is probably unwise to regiment unduly. For example, journaling is often recommended, and some parents have even successfully done side-by-side journaling with their children. For some children, however, journaling is tedious or painful, and they may prefer photography, artwork, dictation into a tape recorder, souvenir collection, ticket stubs, postcards, and the like. In the same manner, tours should offer some optional activities, rather than having everyone in lock step.

Parent orientation and support are equally as important as that provided for the adoptees. Parents, too, experience a mixture of anticipation and angst. Will this trip bring their family comfort or pain? For various reasons, friends and relatives may caution them against such trips, and parents wonder how to deal with this. The pain of infertility may also be revisited. Some may worry that the tour is "the beginning of the end," that is, that their children will feel the pull of country, culture, and birth parent, and leave the nest forever. Moreover, for many adoptive parents, the international option once perhaps offered the possibility of distancing oneself from birth parents. Over the years, birth parents may have been replaced with safer discussions of "the mother country," foster mothers, or orphanage surrogate parents. A Homeland Tour, however, reminds them of the reality that they – like their domestic-adoptive-parent counterparts -- are truly members of a special kinship network known as the "adoption triad" or the "adoption circle." Finally, within the context of the orientation groups, parents also wanted to talk about the possibility that previously undisclosed or new history might be available in their children's overseas file. Through additional consultation with social workers, parents could explore whether the children – most of whom were minors – were developmentally ready to absorb new information, as well as address confidentiality issues and birth parents' rights.

The imagery of "life as a journey" is a favorite one. If we all perceive ourselves as being

“on the way,” this feeling is in fact often more profound for the adopted person. Homeland Tours capture the life-as-a-journey metaphor in a compelling way. Whether as adoption professionals or as adoptive parents, we need to make certain that these journeys are age-appropriate, foster self-esteem, and above all, equip young people to deal with the issues themselves in the future. Adoptive parents need to examine carefully the tour’s auspices, experience, staffing, cost, itinerary, philosophy, goals, and follow-up supports. For the trip to have maximum benefits, the agency needs to provide ongoing supports for parents and adoptees after they return. Agency-sponsored tours have the additional benefit of providing children with ongoing opportunities to socialize at agency-sponsored events.

Homeland Tours are not magic nor are they an “instant fix” for every identity crisis. Many adoptees will want to return a second or third time to continue “connecting the dots.” But with careful planning, the Homeland Tour can be a pivotal experience, with the potential rewards no less than reclaiming the past, celebrating the present, and looking with hope toward the future.

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