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Touring the Homeland: A Journey in Search of Identity and Place in China

"Over the years I have begun to understand how those adopted daughters long to understand their birth mothers, and to tell them how much they love them. I decided that, no matter how painful it was, I would write down the stories I had stored up for so long [...] to be an honest record of mother's lives, a gift of mother-daughter love that I, a daughter, could share with other daughters, a message from an unknown Chinese mother to her daughter, wherever she may be." ~Message From an Unknown Chinese Mother, Xue Xinran, p. XVI

When reading the stories of Chinese adoptees, their longing for answers about their origins and the family that gave them up strikes a familiar chord. I often find myself wondering if I would recognize the faces of people I knew for so little time, or whether I could somehow remember the smell of their clothing and the feeling of their embrace from the months before I was abandoned. These are thoughts potentially shared by tens of thousands of other Chinese girls who were adopted by families overseas, a majority of whom reside in the United States. I cannot speak for all of the girls who have faced the loss of family and a reordering of their future self, but I feel surer of myself knowing that I am not alone in my uncertainty about my identity or in imagining how my life could have been, all of the possible paths forking off of the day that I was disclaimed. Like others who were adopted from Chinese orphanages, I long to know if my biological family thinks about me or regrets the decision to give me up. Like many other Chinese adoptees, the unknown elements of my birth and early life exert a strong pull to go back to the

place where I was born, in the hope that a return to my origins will help me arrive at an understanding of my past, and a fuller sense of identity.

Linda Lappin discusses pilgrimage in the context of the archetypal story arc of "desire-conflict-breakthrough" in conjunction with the concept of sacred and profane spaces. Lappin's definition of sacred spaces applies to my journey towards the formation of a more complete sense of identity, as she believes we can "interpret sacred space as largely as possible, in terms of personally meaningful spaces" (Lappin, p. 58). Such sacred spaces are a feature of heritage tourism, which constitutes a journey or "pilgrimage" allowing Chinese adoptees to return to their place of origin. China can be broadly referred to as this place of origin, but origins also take the shape of alleyways, train stations, orphanages, and police stations; places like these are the starting point for many adoptees' stories. These places form a type of sacred space in which the process of pilgrimage can unfold, both physically and spiritually. The places where daughters were abandoned hold a special power and may be the fuel that sparks the desire for return, as they may symbolize a critical moment of divergence in the lives of adoptees, and their adoptive and biological families. Furthermore, these sacred spaces may evoke inner conflict regarding a lost daughter's feelings about her origins and offer a reference point for reflection. The directness of revisiting these places can provide a sense of closure and an opportunity for introspection by allowing adoptees to reflect on a formative moment contributing to their current, established identity.

Adoption agencies that partner children with families recognize the importance of origins and place in understanding oneself. Post adoption services provided by agencies such as Chinese Children Adoption International include heritage tours which offer guided trips through tourist destinations as well as traditional villages, and optional visits to an adoptee's hometown and

orphanage. In some cases, heritage tours allow adoptees to return to the location where they were abandoned or found. Heritage tourism deviates from leisure tourism in that heritage tourism functions as a cultural bridge for adoptees. The emotional weight of undertaking a heritage tour is much greater than traveling to a place for pleasure or leisure and requires a system of support that is founded on the cooperation and mutual effort of adoptive families, adoption agencies, and the Chinese government. A heritage tour involves a lot of emotional risk. For example, even if adoptees can meet their biological families, the reunion might not be a positive one. Additionally, adoptees may simply be unsuccessful in locating important sites and resolving questions about their past. In this case a large financial investment and a willingness to be vulnerable can result in dead ends, with no answers. Despite these conflicts, adoptees undertake heritage tours because of the potential for resolution to important questions of identity. Therefore, the experience of undertaking a heritage tour constitutes an expression of an archetypal pilgrimage.

Jenna Cook explores the complicated mosaic of interest groups, public perception, and political implications that surround the experience of returning to China. In doing so, she navigates the complex ways in which “children are stakes in historical and contemporary contestations over definitions of cultural identity, nation, and transnationality” (Chen, p. 633). Cook was adopted from China's Hubei province and as a junior undergraduate student at Yale, she traveled to China to undertake the intricate process of tracing her roots to China. Though she was unable to locate her family, Cook's search revealed the efforts of some parents to share part of themselves with daughters they would not, or could not, keep. She writes about a Chinese family that “named their child after the parents’ two hometowns in the hope she would grow up knowing where to find them” (Cook, section: To date, I haven’t found my birth parents, so I

don't know what drove, par. 2). Stories such as this one may prompt adoptees to return to China in search of their biological families. It demonstrates the desire of some families for their children to return and reveals the shared longing between the daughters and their biological families. Furthermore, the act of naming a daughter after the parents' hometowns demonstrates how the identity of Chinese adoptees can be tangibly tied to a sense of place.

In a sense, geography plays a larger role than a connection to the biological family. A child's name may change multiple times over the course of the adoption process, and as their name changes, so does their location in physical space. Orphanages often rename infants and young children, giving them monikers with translations that appeal to adoptive parents. Children will then adopt a new name when they are welcomed into an adoptive family and transported overseas. The replacement of names over the course of the adoption process demonstrates the transformation of identity that is beyond the control of the adoptee. Though "place" can be central to the formation of identity, adoptees face the added challenge of reconciling how their sense of identity is constrained and shaped by the geography of their past. Identity is difficult to define, and for adoptees, geography does not serve as a reliable source of identity. In an essay by Gayle Tan, she discusses the experiences of adoptees who, "feeling rejected by their biological families and yet still an outsider in their adoptive families [...] find it difficult to identify a place and community where they truly belong" (Tan, par. 9). Heritage tourism represents, in part, an attempt to ground identity in geography, and if this attempt is unsuccessful, it can prompt the adoptee to turn towards more stable sources of identity. For example, the adoptive family serves as a source of identity that does not depend so heavily on place. New reference points are created within the family where familial bonds generate a meaningful space within which adoptees can establish a sense of cultural and familial identity.

What is the resolution of a pilgrimage to China? According to Jillian Powers, the process of pilgrimage to China helps adoptees “to understand the contemporary discourses of transnational adoption and the intimate space where belonging, race, culture, and subjectivity are actively shaped” (Powers, p. 73). Through investigative journalism, Powers examines the question of identity in a quagmire of political controversy. She considers the competing nationalist narratives of China and the West and how these play into the complicated dynamic between desire to connect with one's heritage, and the hurt at having been abandoned. She arrives at the idea that homeland tourism to China can help affirm new adoptive family constructs, as well as adoptees' sense of identity and belonging in their adoptive societies. She states that "homeland tourism to China cannot reconcile traditional understandings of family based upon blood and genetics or affirm the economic realities that brought the Chinese child to America in the first place. It does, however, validate these new family constructs and help shape a new identity that is American," but more broadly one which adoptees can share with one another, and through which they can arrive at a new sense of belonging.

The importance of family for identity formation was something that I learned first-hand when visiting China on a heritage tour. The tour was offered by the adoption agency through which my adoptive parents connected with my sister and me. My sister and I were abandoned in cities over 500 miles apart but found ourselves embarking on the same journey to return to our respective hometowns, and to see the places that we could have called home. Despite the distance between the cities where we originated, both felt as foreign to us as any other city in China. The local nuances were lost on us. Like many heritage tour participants (Waldmier, par. 4), we felt that locals expected us to speak perfect Mandarin, even though for us it was a foreign tongue. As we traveled through the streets of our hometowns, it felt less like a return and more

like seeing China for the first time. As the trip progressed, we felt more and more like Americans. China had become a place of murky origins where my native heritage competed with the heritage of my adoptive family. Through transplantation into a new country, I had built my identity on a different cultural foundation. As I stood in the alley where I had been found, I could feel the cultural divide that stretched further than the distance between China and my home in the US. Growing up, I had always thought that I could never be fully American, but I realized that I am foreign to China as well. At the end of the day, I am left to reflect on the idea that I am part of a subculture, a unique community of fellow adoptees. My identity is wrapped up in my belonging to this subculture rather than my nationality.

This pilgrimage, a heritage tour to China, had the transformative effect described by Lappin by allowing me to follow the arc of a journey which ultimately led me to arrive at a profound personal change. I realized that I am not fully Chinese or American. My heritage is of Chinese origin, but my entire life since my adoption has been spent in the US. The experience of living in the US forms the core of my formative years and has played a major role in shaping my identity. I cannot ignore the importance of my inclusion in the community of foreign adoptees who have roots in China, but I can also not deny that China no longer feels like a place that I feel a strong urge to return to in the sense of going home. Home is the family and country that raised me. I am relieved to have been able to return to China and finally realize that though it is an important part of my identity, I do not need to know everything about my past to feel whole.

Heritage tours to China work as pilgrimages, closely following the narrative arc described by Linda Lappin. As Jenna Cook demonstrates, participation in a heritage tour involves a step into a complicated mosaic of political narratives and discourses surrounding the identity of Chinese adoptees in the US. While many adoptees travel to China in the hopes of

forming a stronger sense of identity with the place where they were born, as well as a Chinese national identity, forming an identity around a place is difficult. Adoptees often deal with personal histories that involve multiple locations including hometowns, locations of abandonment, and orphanages, as well as international adoptions by families in the United States and elsewhere. For these reasons, the result of a pilgrimage to China in the search of an adoptee's origins is often a reinforcement of a new identity, built around their adopted family and the unique identity adoptees share with one another.

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