

Understanding the Attachment Stories of Immigrant Families: A Korean-American Family Case Study



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Understanding Parents' Immigration Narrative: Duty and Responsibility is Equal to Love and Attachment

This time, one of the ways I tried to connect with Richard was to ask about the details of his parents' immigration story. I refrained from asking about his emotions too soon. As we proceeded, his perceptions and emotions emerged through stories of his father's journey from North Korea to South Korea, and then to Chicago. Through years of working with Asian Americans, I've learned that getting to know their immigration story is as critical as getting their early attachment history. It is important to understand why they, or their parents, left Korea, why they chose to come to America, how they were told by parents about leaving their country and their arrival in the USA, and about how their life unfolded in the first few years in America. In their parent's immigration stories, one can hear how they dealt with loneliness and how they understood safety and security in this world.

Angie Kim writes in her novel, *Miracle Creek*, about Bak Yoo, the father of Mary, as he laments his feelings that the thing he regrets most about their move to

America was "the shame of becoming less proficient and less an adult than his own child. He expected this to happen eventually, seeing how children and parents switch places, as the parent's age and their minds and bodies revert to childhood, then to infancy, and finally to nonbeing." While parents cope with the harsh life of immigration, the children lose their parent's physical presence. They also feel the weight of their parent's grief, shame, stress and longings of "how the family used to be" in their home country.

In his recent interview with *the Guardian*, Bong Joon-Ho, the Korean director of the award-winning movie *Parasite*, expressed his concern for Korea's current state of mind. He said that there is a "collective anxiety, since the war, there is a unique hysteria prevalent in Korean society." After the war ended in 1953, all the energy from this grief and despair were poured into rebuilding the country. There was a sense of urgency and that one had to act quickly. There was a collective fear that you could lose everything once again. In this rapidly changing, alarming and hyper-vigilant environment, the question is, "How does one express emotional need?" This was especially true with families who were strongly attached to responsibility and duty.

Richard's parents experienced both the Japanese occupation and the Korean war. They, along with all Koreans, were exposed to painful uncertainty, fear for their lives, separation from families, and high levels of anxiety about survival. Richard's parents left the country by burying their wartime memories along with their dreams of being geographically close to their families. Families who dealt with this grief and loss and continue to come to the United States, come here to buy futures for their children. As a young boy, Richard's father fled his home village to escape being drafted to the North Korean Army. When Richard recalled the story of his escape, he connected with how much his father endured as a young person

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and understood his father's need to become super-focused on performance and responsibility. Richard also understood that his father had loved him, even though he had never verbalized it.

However, with this laser focus to achieve, build and survive, there was no room for the emotions that deserve adequate space and time for expression. From seeing Korean immigrants in my office, I've come to understand that they utilize this collective coping strategy of avoidance to function, and hopefully, to achieve success in the United States.

In August Wilson's powerful work about black families, "Fences", there is a scene where the son, Cory, asks his dad, Troy, the question, "How come you ain't never liked me?" Troy responds, "Like you? I go out of here every morning... bust my butt.... It's my job. It's my responsibility! You understand that? A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house... sleep your behind on my bedclothes... fill you belly up with my food... 'cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not 'cause I like you. 'Cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not 'cause I like you, 'cause it's my duty to take care you. I owe a responsibility to you! Let's get this straight right here... before it go along any further... I ain't got to like you." In my experience, this is a sure way to shut down the emotional connection. When I watched this scene, I think of my immigrant clients, shut down and withdrawn, who can't ask for anything else except to be grateful. Duty and responsibility take over where tender emotions once existed. This strong sense of duty and responsibility may also hurt families. The "ghee-ruh-ghee ap-bah" or "wild-goose father", is a term that Koreans use for a father who remained in Korea working to support his family while his wife and children moved overseas. These families often move to Canada or the U.S. for better educational opportunities and the father would visit annually. This type of separation and disconnection from loved ones brought many problems, such as increased rates of heavy drinking and depression among wild goose fathers in Seoul.

Minji and Richard's parents have very different

immigration stories. Minji's parents have never looked back since they moved to this country. They were determined to raise Minji as an American and they never visited their home country again. They did not want to indulge in nostalgia. They do not want to think about the experience of the Korean war where they lost everything, including Minji's uncle being shot by Japanese soldiers. Minji was an only child and received devoted care, every educational opportunity, and all the financial support they could provide for her. In her view, she was growing up American — independent with the ability to exercise the rights and freedoms of being an American. But Minji would say, "I feel like a fake white person in a Korean body."

Choosing a Family is Love

The couple reconciled after more than two years of separation and decided to work on their marriage. Their reasons for reconciliation were quite different than those I hear from my American couples. American couples will often say, "I realized how much I love my spouse." I did not hear this sentiment from Minji or Richard. She said, "I realized in the end, that he is a kind person and very responsible in providing for me and our children. It is best that we are together to bring up our children, to be responsible for their lives, because there are no alternatives." Richard agreed. This sense of duty and responsibility creates a safe haven that feels deeper than love for them. This is what led them to recommit and work on their relationship. Perhaps this is what is comfortable and familiar about their parents' relationships. Based on this new understanding, they are focused on building a new kind of marriage where there is more safety and more flexibility. They have found a way to honor their two cultures, allow their differing beliefs to breathe and to co-exist in a way that works for both of them.

Immigrant families carry profound grief and high hopes for their lives in their new country and they are faced with challenges that may trigger old grief issues. The Korean war ended over 67 years ago. However, the remnants of war still reverberate in people's minds, whether they live in their own

country, or choose to seek another. My job is to be curious about their immigration stories, ask them to retell their stories so that they can hear them again and understand their pain and complexity. The more they can know about their grandparents' and parents' immigration stories, the easier it will be to dissolve deep guilt and grief that lives inside them. Perhaps then, they will feel safe enough to honor their own emotional needs.

This is a small slice of a Korean immigrant story; however, at the core, this is a story of longing to belong despite all the grief passed down from generation to generation.

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