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### ON THE ROAD: STRUGGLING, SEARCHING AND OPPORTUNITIES YOUNG ASIANS IN MISSOULA SEEK THEIR CULTURAL IDENTITIES

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ON THE ROAD: STRUGGLING, SEARCHING AND OPPORTUNITIES  
YOUNG ASIANS IN MISSOULA SEEK THEIR CULTURAL IDENTITIES

By

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**On the Road: Struggling, Searching and Opportunities**  
Young Asians in Missoula seek their cultural identities

Chairperson: Professor Clem Work

Where are you from? When do you use “we?” The answers to these two questions are easy for people from a single cultural background, but may not be so simple for those young Asians who have grown up and lived in the U.S. but aren’t sure where they belong. This project includes two stories of two young women from Missoula. They have been searching for their cultural identities and have found that the searching will never end. They will probably always be on the road back and forth between the U.S. and their ancestry countries.

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## Introduction

It all began with Allen. Allen was by sheer character the most popular foreign English teacher among the three in my high school (101 High School in Beijing) from 1997 to 1998. Tall and handsome, he always wore a gray hoodie and flashed a smile whenever he saw us. Allen was an America-born Chinese. He was an exchange student learning Chinese at Peking University that year. I had never met an American face-to-face before, and found myself as a fellow student spellbound by his earnest talk about a country so far away, but one that attracts many people to make their dreams come true.

But soon I found that behind his happy smile there was an unhappy heart. Those unforgettable memories of his childhood that he casually mentioned in our class made every girl want to cry for him. Growing up in Los Angeles, he never doubted that he was an American, but other kids called him “China boy” and “yellow kid.” At home, his parents spoke with him in English but educated him with their traditional Chinese ways. One day, he went to a party where a drunken white classmate pointed at him and said “You are nobody!” “You can never be one of us and you are not a Chinese, either. You barely speak Chinese.” Allen left the party with his heart broken.

Where are you from? When do you use “we?” The answers to these two questions are easy for people from a single culture background, but may not be so simple for those young Asians who have grown up and lived in the U.S. but aren’t sure where they belong.

Some of them are the children of immigrants’ families, called “ABC”, “ABK” and “ABV,” standing for America born Chinese, America born Korean, America born Vietnamese. Some of them are adopted by American families and were brought to America as babies. Most of them had some special experiences that distinguished them from other kids while growing up.

According to Fengru Li, an associate professor in the UM Business School who has been doing research on international communication for many years, those experiences sometimes will affect their personal characteristics and become a determinative element for them as they choose career. In Missoula, I found two girls who had similar feelings as Allen while growing up --- they were confused about their identity.

Addie Rogness, an adopted Korean girl from Helena currently studying at the University of Montana, never felt very happy or complete since she was a child. Even though she knew she was adopted from the very beginning, she still sometimes felt frustrated because she looked different from her parents and friends. She thought she was an American but she also felt that half of her was empty for some reason. In 2006 when she turned 18, Rogness attempted to get in touch with her birth family in Korea and started her journey in search of the other half of herself.

Kao Nou Thao is 100 percent American. She never doubted it. She was born in Missoula and grew up here. Because of her Hmong ancestry, her growing up story was a

little special: She was told to “only speak English because you are in America” by a stranger when she spoke to her brother in Hmong at a candy shop in Missoula. She was often mistaken for an international student and was asked for a copy of her visa when applying for on-campus jobs; she experienced the conflicts of American and Hmong culture when her brother married an American girl. All of this made Thao feel frustrated, unhappy and confused while she was growing up.

After many years struggling and learning, Rogness and Thao have found ways to introduce themselves, to help people understand them, and to answer those questions for themselves, inside of their hearts. It never has been easy and it is an endless journey searching for their identities.

Rogness has decided to take this semester off from the University of Montana. She is considering going outside of the U.S. and studying the Korean language. In the future, she wants to work with adopted children: “I think it’s so hard to not know anything and I think it’s so important to have at least the basic understanding of where you come from and to be able to experience it.”

Thao has one year to graduate from the Graduate School of the University of Montana. She knows what she wants to do in the future. She wants to work with Hmong kids and kids from other cultural ethnicities and to help them with their identity issues. “I think if you have a strong sense of identity and a positive sense of identity, it really builds your realization and helps you with your adult life.”

In the classroom of 101 High School 11 years ago, we Chinese girls were touched by Allen’s stories and fell in love with him in some way or other. By now Allen may have found his way to handle his identity and may be teaching his kids how to face those tough times brought on by their multicultural backgrounds. But he may never forget that night at that party and those hurtful sentences.

I hope this project will not only encourage people who have the same experience as Rogness and Thao to start on their journey in search of their cultural identities, but for people in general to understand the complications and impact of identity issues on people from multicultural backgrounds, and to admire them.

## **I am American, I love Korea**

I first met Addison Rogness at the Food Zoo of the University of Montana in 2006. She was of medium height and skinny, with jet black hair tumbling down her neck and tan skin. She had a warm expression that quickly melted into an infectious smile when she was among friends.

“Are you Japanese?” she asked.

“No, I am Chinese,” I answered, “Are you from Asia?”

“No, I am American. I was adopted from South Korea,” she said.

Later, when Rogness and I became friends, I had a chance to learn the story behind her smile. As a 20-year-old sophomore at the University of Montana, Addie may be a representative of those young adopted Asian children who think searching for their native cultural identities is very important for their lives.

### Struggling

Addie was adopted when she was 4 months old, and grew up in Helena, Mont. Even though she knew she was adopted from the beginning, she still could not stop asking herself “why do I look different?”

“Pretty much all of my life I just felt frustrated because you just grow up in a culture and you didn’t realize that you belong to another one,” said Rogness. “If I didn’t have a mirror, I probably would think I was white because I talk like everyone else and the only difference is how I look.”

Much research has indicated that when adopted children become adolescents they experience an identity issue. Not only do they question who they are in relation to their family, they face questions concerning their culture and place in the world.

Addie had a hard time when she was in high school and was very confused about her identity. Sometimes she even became angry without knowing how to explain it.

Rogness's adoptive parents did many things to help her with this frustration. They thought it was important to not sever that world from Rogness, so she can learn more about that part of herself that could better strengthen her self-esteem and emotional development.

They have been supportive of her search for her cultural identity. They gave Rogness a Korean traditional costume, a Hanbok, when she was a child. Sometimes they cooked hot Korean dinners for her, even though they dislike spicy. They also found some Korean exchange students in local universities who talk with Rogness, she felt very weird when she faced those Korean students.

"I don't even know how to address myself," she said, "because culturally, I know nothing of Korean culture, I don't know Korean food, I don't know Korean tradition, and I'm just completely outside of it."

Rogness' brother, Dylan Rogness, who is also adopted from Korea, seems can't help his sisters with her identity. The 22-year-old senior at the University of Montana did not want to handle this issue at that early age.

"I think he has his own way to handle this, which is different from me," said Rogness, "He wants to know America first, but not hurry to go back to find his Korean part as I do."

Rogness began to search for friends who could share her feelings. The kids she grew up with never treated her differently, but she always had issues with not fitting in because she could not identify herself. No one looks like her except her brother.



“I tried to explain my feeling to them, but it didn’t help me a lot,” said Rogness. “Sometimes, I didn’t even know how to describe it myself.”

The complicated feelings made her become very quiet. She would hurry back to her house rather than linger for a chat with her friends after school. Her face rarely smiled. Instead, she felt taut and downcast.

Until one day, when Rogness went to a party at one of her friend’s house. It was there that she met Julie, who was from Colorado and was also adopted from Korea. Although it was the first time they had met, the two girls who have the same ancestry hit it off right away. They began sharing their stories about their depression, about their lives. The party became a private room just for the two of them, even though their friends were singing and talking around them.

“I know a lot of adoptees, but I am really just good friends with one girl, Julie,” said Rogness. “We have a lot in common. We usually just play; we don’t chat too deep all the time. But when I shared the feeling with her, she could understand.”

With Julie’s suggestion and encouragement, Rogness joined the Korean Students Association at UM and got to know Korea through communicating with Korean students face-to-face. This time, she tried to banish the embarrassment and strange feeling that haunted her before.

Julie had been to Korea to meet with her biological mother. She therefore helped Rogness prepare her own trip back to Korea later.

“Julie helped me look at the reality of what I was going through,” said Rogness. “For instance, she told me, ‘of course it’s wonderful, but you are not going to feel good all the

time because it's really confusing.' She is a really big help on that and I didn't really have anyone else to talk to it."

### Searching

Rogness's parents did not give up helping her with her confusion. When they found out that she dreamed of meeting her birth mother, they helped her to contact the adoption agency in Korea to find her birth family.

"My mom has been in touch with the agency ever since they adopted us," said Rogness. "She sent pictures and letters to the adoption agency all through her life and hoped the family would contact the agency as well."

However, in Korea, there is a rule that the information about the birth family and the file on adopted children may not be released until the adopted children become 18-years-old. Therefore, the agency never responded to those photos and passionate letters from Rogness's mother.

"It wasn't until I went to Korea for the first time, that I began to realized how weird and strict the rule was to not release this information until you turn 18," said Rogness. "Prior to (your) turning 18, they are more conservative and they don't put out extra miles to help you find anything."

Rogness began counting down the days to her 18th birthday.

In 2006, the year she became 18, Rogness knew that the moment was coming. At a time when her other friends were content to be independent adults, Rogness couldn't wait to know her birth mother and her family in Korea.

“I will see my mother in Korea soon, Julie!” Rogness shouted on the phone again and again.

In September of that year, her American mother contacted the adoption agency in Korea again for information about the birth families of Rogness and her brother: “My kids are 18 and 20 now, we want to come back to Korea,” she recalled saying. “And we are going to be in Korea. We want to see if you can contact any family members.”

Two week passed, but no e-mail from Korea. Rogness felt disappointed. She was even afraid that the agency would not provide any information.

“I thought a lot,” said Rogness, “and finally I made up my mind to come back to Korea by myself someday to search for my birth mother if the agency didn’t reply to our e-mails. This calmed me down some.”

One day in October, 2006, Rogness’s mother suddenly received an e-mail from the agency that they had found Rogness’s birth family in Korea. It had been more than three weeks since Rogness’s mother sent out her last e-mail.

“It was really amazing,” said Rogness, “Eighteen years of not knowing anything, and you just call her up like that and she answered.”

In the e-mail, the agency also brought some bad news: Rogness’s birth mother had died when her daughter was just 2 years old.

“I actually found out on the same day that my birth mother has passed away 16 years ago,” said Rogness. “It was really just an emotional moment and I just didn’t know how to react to it.”

The agency did, however, deliver a very exciting message to Rogness: both her grandmother and aunt in Korea wanted to meet Rogness. Her parents then shortly decided

to visit Korea -- the only place she could find herself.

One week before their trip, in December of 2006, another surprise came. Rogness's aunt in Korea sent her a letter.

"It was in Korean," said Rogness. "Somebody translated it for me and it was so touching. They really wanted to see me."

Before leaving for Korea, Rogness told me that she had mixed emotions.

"My life is changing just because I finally get to see where I am from, who I am from," said Rogness, "but it's a little intimidating for me to see the family."

"... I feel like I can't be myself because I am so American and I am going to talk to them through translators. I don't even know what I am going to say and it is so emotional..."

"I just want to hug them and kiss them but I don't know if they would like that."

But she insisted that the trip was important and necessary.

"The trip is to find pieces of my identity...because a big part of me is just empty..."

On January 14, a cloudy day in Helena, Rogness left America and started her long trip back to Korea with her brother and parents. It was only a short 7-day trip, but it meant a lot.

"I still remember that moment when I arrived Korea," said Rogness, "It was weird because I couldn't read anything and it was a completely different environment, but I felt really comfortable. I don't know why."

On the third day they were in Korea, the agency brought Rogness and her brother to see their birth families separately. Rogness's brother, Dylan, met his birth mother and

aunt first and then it was Rogness's turn to see her grandma, whom she had been dreaming. The old woman cried through most of the meeting.

"I met my aunt, uncle and grandma, they were so nice and emotional," said Rogness. "My grandma always held my hand and couldn't stop crying."

She had so many questions to ask, but her emotions overtook. She couldn't remember what she had planned to ask. Through the translator, however, the family told Rogness that they were so surprised that she would finally attempt to contact them because her birth was a family secret.

"Actually my grandma knew that my mother was pregnant," said Rogness, "but because my grandfather apparently was very traditional, and my birth father at that time was in the military, I guess in Korean ethics it wasn't possible for her to keep me."

Rogness's grandma, her eldest uncle and her birth mother were the only three people who knew about her. Later, in 1990, after her birth mother died (two years after Rogness was born), Rogness's aunt discovered her mother's diary and letters. She therefore became the fourth person who found out that Rogness's birth.

Rogness was happy to know that for all those years, as she was dreaming of finding her family in Korea, on the other side of the world, her Korean family had been searching for her.

"My grandma told me through the translator that they really wanted to find me," said Rogness. "I guess after my mother died they felt really guilty."

Rogness' mother died of pneumonia in her 24<sup>th</sup> year in 1990. After that, her grandma and aunt tried to contact the agency about Rogness's information. However, the agency refused to release the information because "your daughter's name is the only one

on the certificate, therefore you can't have her daughter's information." It was really frustrating.

After the short meeting with her grandma in Seoul, Rogness needed to return to the U.S., but she promised her grandma that she would come back to Korea and visit her birthplace, Pusan, the biggest coastal city in Korea, where her grandma lives.

"The things touching me most during this trip were really those little things," said Rogness.

"My uncle, aunt and my grandma came to see me in Seoul. And my grandma, though she knew I couldn't speak a word in Korean, she was just so sweet. She was just holding my arm saying something in Korean to me, just like I could understand. It just inferred to me that she was not shy about it and she was so courageous to speak out."

Rogness said she realized that this was a precious opportunity for her to connect with two different cultures.

"I have two families from two different cultures in the world," said Rogness. "I need to understand both of the cultures well. I have grown up in American culture, now it's time for me to learn more about Korean culture."

After her first trip to Korea, Rogness felt that she had to return to Korea again, to keep her promise to her grandma to continue learning about Korean culture.

### Opportunities

In February 2008, after several months preparing for her first time living abroad, , Rogness began a 6-month-long study in Yon Sei University in Seoul, one of the best universities in Korea. This decision was difficult for Rogness' American family.

“My parents were really worried about whether I could handle it myself because I have never left home and lived by myself,” said Rogness. “And I tried my best to convince them that I could because I really wanted this trip.”

Rogess knew she was going to return sometime with her birth family, which was the big part of the reason why she chose to return. Therefore, she told me that the motivation of this second visit to Korea was to learn more about her family and to learn the Korean language.

During her stay in Yon Sei University, Rogness lived in the international dorm. There, she met and made friends with many international students and Korean students who temporarily lived there due to the construction of their dorms. She wanted to talk to more Korean students, but they were busy with their homework and seldom stayed in the lobby for long. Rogness didn’t make a lot of friends on campus, either, because the international house was not actually on campus. Korean people, in her eyes, can be a little reserved.

“Maybe they are nervous about their English skills,” said Rogness.

Outside of class, however, she met many Korean students from Yon Sai University through the local English Club. Many were helping international students learn the Korean language and about Korean culture. She joined in.

“They had this culture called “meeting,” said Rogness. “Basically, you go out on blind dates with groups, then you just drink together and mingle. Then you got to know many people.”

Rogness was not old enough to drink legally in Montana, but she could. She experienced the Korean drinking culture from a closer perspective.

In Korea, the legal drinking age is 19, but their aging system is quite different from other countries. Children are considered to be one year on the day they are born, because Koreans also count the time spent in the womb in their age.

As in other Asian countries, control of the drinking age in Korea is not as strict as in the U.S. Many stores and bars sell alcoholic beverages to the underage. Most bars don't ask for IDs unless you look very young. Rogness went to bars several times with her friends, who were rarely asked for IDs.

"I think it's probably because Korean people have a tight self-control on their personal lives," said Rogness. "They know when to stop drinking and even if they were drunk, they couldn't get a gun to shoot randomly."

Most of the time, Rogness shared the Korean rice wine "Soju" with her friends. She was not really fond of it because it is a little spicy and strong for her, but she was surprised at how popular this national drink was in Korea. She enjoyed experiencing such different tastes.

In the bars, Rogness had a chance to witness those famous Asian men's after-work drinking scenes, which she had heard so much about.

"You will see businessmen of all ages drinking soju," said Rogness. "It's so fun to see them outside, totally red-faced."

Through talking with her uncle, Sungman Song, from her birth family, who works in Seoul, Rogness realized that the after-work drinking in Korea was the best reward for men's hardwork.

"My uncle would go to work at 7 a.m. and come back at 8 p.m. or 9 p.m.," said Rogness. "Korean men work so hard and the after-work drinking provides a time for



them to relax and mingle with colleagues and clients.”

Besides taking part in the Korean drinking culture, Rogness also went to the “Nolibang,” the Korean karaoke room, for the first time in her life. The experience with a group of Korean friends was really special.

“That was so much fun,” said Rogness. “They would sing Korean songs and I would sing English songs, and they would sing English songs, too. That was really cool and it was one of my favorite times in Korea.”

During her study in Yun Sai University, Rogness learned some history that she had never heard in the U.S. She registered for a modern Korean history class, which gave her a general idea of the evolution of modern Korea from the Fall of the Chosen Dynasty (about late 1800) to the present.

“I just think that many tragic things happened to Korea,” said Rogness. “It had such a hard time in history, the relationship with China, Japanese colonization, and American occupation.”

She also learned a lot about the Korean War and the reasons that led to South Korea’s being westernized and North Korea choosing communism. She had never heard about such thing in the U.S.

“I just realized that some of the history is not mentioned all though my high school,” said Rogness. “It’s really a big shock. We did a lot on European and anything related to America, but not the Korean War. This class definitely taught me a lot.”

Besides history classes, Rogness took a Korean pop culture class, in which she experienced the hottest thing in Asian pop culture these days --- “Hanlyu.”

“Hanlyu,” the so-called Korean wave, covers the craze for South Korean TV dramas, movies and pop singers, but increasingly also for fashion, cosmetics and electronics all over Asia. The term “Hanlyu” (in Chinese character, 韩流) was first used by a Chinese press in the late 1990s, when Korean TV dramas and Korean pop music began to gain ground in mainland China.

Many people attribute the success of “Hanlyu” into it re-picks traditional Asian cultural sentiment---family value, love and loyalty when other countries are experiencing westernization. “What South Korea does is to sell the essence of our culture to us,” said Liu Changle, the board director of Hong Kong-based Phoenix TV. The success of “Hanlyu” has now become a major booster of Korean industry, and its economic impact amounts to as much as 1 trillion won (US\$936 million in Jan, 2008).

The class taught Rogness from the historical side of “Hallyu,” the evolution of Korean pop culture, and the significance of Korean drama that is so popular in Asia nowadays.

“I got really into some boys and girls idol groups that other young Koreans were into,” said Rogness. “Oh my god, it was so cool.”

After Rogness finished school in Seoul, she spent a month in Pusan with her grandma. She first thought it was crazy because she and her birth family had only met one time before. Now they were going to live together. But Rogness discovered that it was so natural and comfortable for her to stay with them. From that moment, she began to closely observe a typical Korean family. She felt that during that month in Pusan, she lived like a real Korean.

“My aunt and one of my uncles live with my grandma in Pusan,” said Rogness. “The

grandma is so strong in the family. She volunteered for the Red Cross, so she was always going out and doing things, but she made us meals everyday, cleaned up everything, and wouldn't let us do a thing. It's just like kids are young again."

Rogness was surprised to learn that both her aunt and uncle had never married, even though she was 41 years old and he was 35 years old. She had assumed that most Asians marry early.

"I was worried about them and told my aunt that they needed get married," said Rogness, "but none of them wanted to get married. I think they just chose work."

Rogness had an unforgettable time with her birth family in Pusan, 80 percent of which she attributes to her uncle. She was lucky that her uncle was on vacation when she was there. So she had somebody there all the time instead of being alone at home.

The communication between the two was difficult in the beginning because Rogness could speak only a little Korean while her uncle knew only minimal English.

"My uncle said that 'I didn't speak English for 10 years,' which was really funny," said Rogness, "but he really tried his best to remember and talk to me. We didn't really have a problem understanding each other."

Together with her uncle and aunt who would always take her out whenever she was off from the work, Rogness appreciated almost every specialty of Pusan: She sampled the *gugolbi* (a kind of grilled fish) and fresh Korean sushi in the famous fish market of Pusan. She went to the Pusan International film festival where she saw Korean movie stars and watched several movies. She enjoyed the sights and sunshine on the Hyudai Beach.

The most impressive sight for Rogness, however, was the Korean traditional Sauna

“Jim Jil bang.” Jim Jil Bang has a hot water pool, a cold water pool, a steam room and a sauna room.

“I just felt like totally part of the family when we were there,” said Rogness. “We usually spent the entire day there.”

Jim Jil Bang has a women’s side and a men’s side, and women and men soak in separate pools. But they have a co-ed lounge, where people can eat food, watch TV, read newspaper and comics. After resting, you can always go back to sauna again.

“We all just go and sleep and enjoy massages there, and they taught me how to headwrap,” said Rogness. “It makes me look like Princess Leia in Star Wars. We did that every weekend because my aunt always wanted me to do that.”

Rogness realized that the basic spirit of Jim Jil Bang was family reunion. She never saw a person who went there alone. All she saw was families. It reflects the strong family ties in Korea---though you are busy, you still need to spend time with your family.

One-month staying with her birth family made Rogness felt close to them, even though they had just met twice before.

“I basically stayed with strangers for a month, but they were very amazing and I felt really comfortable,” she said. “It just shows me how clearly Korean values are---blood is family.”

At the same time, Rogness always had a strong feeling her family really wanted her around.

“Maybe I remind them a lot of my birth mom,” said Rogness.

Rogness couldn’t help thinking about her birth mother, either. Sometimes she imagined what it would be like if her birth mom were still alive or if she already had a

new family. “Would she be ready to face me?” she always asked herself.

With Rogness and her uncle Song Chan Song getting much closer, he began to tell her little things about her birth mom, Mi Yeong Song. In his eyes, Mi Yeong was the friend, mother and guardian to him and his brother Sung Man (the uncle who lives in Seoul). They had many memories about her, though they were very little when she passed away. She took them to stores and movies. She was kind and always smiled. They loved her a lot.

Even though she received little information about her mother, she was happy to hear all she could get. She tried to draw the outline of her mother with those little details. But she also had to face the fact that her birth mother would never see her again, a fact, she didn't want to face for a long time.

One day, the uncle brought Rogness to a big temple far from their house in Pusan. He told Rogness that her birth mother's ashes were spread on the mountain where the temple is located. It was an emotional moment. With the images of her birth mother in mind, mainly from the photos her aunt showed her earlier and those little stories by her uncle, she was crying every step of the way as she climbed the mountain to the temple.

“It has been my dream to talk with my birth mother face to face,” said Rogness, “and I came here, but can only talk to her through trees and soils.”

To pray for her birth mother, Rogness entered a Buddhist temple for the first time in her life with her Korean family.

“I feel very emotional, but also a little interesting, especially with the Buddhism involved.”

Rogness's American parents are Christian. But she never felt comfortable and

fully accepted by the Christian church. As she entered this temple with her uncle, who is a Buddhist and Korean nationalist, she listened to his explanation of every Buddha inside, following him as he prayed, she felt an unprecedented comfort with this religion.

“The temple is so surreal and calming,” said Rogness. “Even when I thought about my birth mother, I just felt peace and good, not nervous at all.” “But Christian church was always stiff and made me feel really nervous.”

After Rogness’s uncle Song Chan told her more about her birth mother, she started to ask him about her birth father, whose name she didn’t know. He said he had never known him because he was quite young at that time. But Rogness kept asking, telling him that it was really important for her. The persistence and passion may have touched him finally. One day, Song Chan drew a triangle: “This is your mother, this is your birth father and this is another man your mother met after she broke with your father when he was in the service.”

“It was really weird because before everybody told me that they didn’t know my birth father at all,” said Rogness.

She felt like the uncle gave her the hint that she should ask her aunt about this. She realized that it’s the Korean way to protect her and save her by not telling her the information.

“I then asked them to be honest to me and tell me the truth,” said Rogness, “I knew they were keeping something from me.”

After a lot of crying, the uncle talked to the aunt in Korean convincing her to tell Rogness what she knew about the father. A few days later, the aunt brought a photo, which was different from the one about the birth mother she showed her earlier. Inside, it

was the letters which Rogness's birth father sent to her birth mother during his service, and pictures of him and both of them together.

"I had never expected to meet him and I kind of gave up on that," said Rogness, "because before I had asked my aunt if she had photos about my birth father and she said 'No, I burnt them.'"

It took Rogness forever to looking at those photos. She watched every picture so carefully that she didn't want to miss any details or even a little feature on their faces in the pictures.

"I really do look like them both," said Rogness. "I have his nose completely."

Rogness had heard from her uncle that her birth father was a tae kwon do black belt. And she saw the evidence among the photos.

"He had these really cool photos that he was kicking his legs above his head and kicking into a punching bag," said Rogness. "I really love them."

Rogness tried to ask her aunt more about her birth father with the help of her uncle's translation. The aunt told her that they had tried to contact him before the meeting with Rogness in Seoul, but they couldn't find him. He was not in Pusan anymore.

"Now I have the hope --- to find him," Rogness said.

Rogness thought she could find him better than her family could because she could go through the agency that would provide some information only to her, the adoptee. But she is worried that her birth father didn't know she existed.

"I kind of want to wait until my Korean improves," said Rogness, "So I can go over there and be able to explain to him by myself." "Face to face is so important to me."

"That's the hope for my future, I will return to Korea in next two years for that if

nothing else. That's something I have to do in my lifetime."

Rogness has decided to take this semester off from the University of Montana. She is considering going outside of the U.S. and pursuing the Korean language. She hasn't chosen her major yet, but she said she might choose Korean as her minor. In the future, she wants to work with adopted children.

"Because I am one and I think it would be so important for me to give back, appreciate what I have and just share that with other people," said Rogness.

Looking back to her second Korean trip, she said she was lucky to meet people with whom she could identify.

"That's what I have been missing in Missoula," said Rogness. "I only have Julie here, but I met a lot of Korean Americans, adopted Koreans and half and half in Seoul.

Most of the Korean-Americans Rogness met in Seoul were from California, where many Asian immigrants live. Rogness was so surprised to see that some of them were strong Korean nationalists even though they were born in America. They would tell Rogness that Korean language and Korean culture were very important in their lives. She met some Korean immigrants in Montana, but they didn't care about this as much as them. Rogness had a really good time with those Korean-Americans in Korea.

If on her first trip, Rogness took away a glimpse of Korea through meeting with her birth family and walking through the famous shopping district in Seoul, the second trip provided more time and more opportunities for her to understand the Korean society more comprehensively and deeply. Her view of Korea at this time, therefore, became more practical.

"You have to know one thing," said Rogness. "I realized as much as I love Korea



I am so glad that I didn't grow up in Korea, being a Korean child is really hard."

During her second visit, Rogness witnessed what the saying, "Five hours failed, four hours pass," means (referring to the number of hours a student sleep at night) --- how serious Koreans take their education in school and how stressed Korean kids are. Rogness's Korean friends told her that in Korea everybody had a dream and they would spend their lives following their dreams.

Rogness realized that if she wanted to stay, live and work like Koreans, she had to commit herself to the job, the society and maybe the family after marriage. That sounds really scary to her. She doesn't know if she could handle the stress. She thought that she could never be a real Korean.

"I am really appreciative of growing up in the U.S.," said Rogness. "I definitely have the sense now. At first, I just wanted to be a Korean and leave the American life behind, but I got a good balance now."

But she insisted that keeping the cultural connection with Korea is important and necessary for her.

"That just reminds me that I don't have to live in America forever," said Rogness. "I can survive somewhere else. I have another home on the other side of the world."

#### Epilogue:

During her second visit in Korea, Rogness fell in love with a handsome young man in Seoul who is half German and half Korean. At Christmas in 2008, she went to Germany to visit her boyfriend. The boy's mother, who is Korean, helped Rogness translate her birth mother's diary. Reading through the diary, the woman felt that

Rogness's mother was very depressed and disappointed with her family because they didn't want her to keep the child.

"Many sentences indicated that they knew that she was pregnant," said Rogness.

Rogness started to doubt if her birth mother died of pneumonia. She has decided to go back to Korea next year to continue her further study of Korean culture and language, more importantly, to find her birth father and to know more about the truth.

"I am still on my way to search for myself," said Rogness.

Adoptions (SIDE BARS):

There has been a steady increase of adoption of Asian children by American families since China opened its door to foreign adoption in the 1990s. According to data published by the U.S. Department of State, the United States issued 5,453 immigrant visas to Chinese orphans and 939 to Korean orphans in 2007. In all, nine countries and regions were on the list of "Top 20 Orphan Issuing Countries FY-2007." Asia has been the largest origin of orphans adopted by American families since 2000. Vietnam, India, and Kazakhstan are also among the top countries in Asia for foreign adoptions.

According to Liz Dodge, the director of the Missoula Chinese adoption group (families with Chinese babies), more than 20 families in Missoula alone have adopted Chinese children. So far, 17 families in Missoula have joined the group.

With the increase of Asian adopted children in Missoula, more and more parents have begun to think about how to help their children to keep certain connections with their native culture. Those children, on the other hand, also need to face the challenge of their native cultural exposure and their native cultural identity while growing up.

"I think it's so hard not to know anything," said Rogness. "I think it's so important

to have at least the basic understanding of where you come from and to be able to experience it.”

## I am a Hmong American

*Hmong people originally came from China. The Hmong in America are mainly refugee families who supported the CIA military efforts in Laos. Currently, about 180,000 Hmong people live in the U.S., largely concentrated in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and California. Montana was the first refuge for Hmong people in the U.S. after the communists began to take charge of Laos in 1975.*

*Like most kids who grew up in two cultural backgrounds, Kao Nou Thao, a Hmong girl in Missoula, also experienced the contradictions, the depression, and the confusion while growing up. Here is the story about her, both sad and happy.*

Kao Nou Thao is very famous among Hmong people in Missoula --- at least I thought so when I first met her at the Vietnam Noodle Restaurant in Missoula two years ago. Tiny and slim, she looked very young in a brown casual jacket. She was sitting with a group of Hmong people at the round table, but her exceptional short dark hair made her stand out. Hmong kids were chasing each other around her loudly, but when she started to talk, everyone became quite and listened to her.

Later, our professor from our Intercultural Communication class invited her to speak to us about race, culture and inter-race relations. She was a graduate student in Anthropology from UM and she had been doing a lot of work to introduce Hmong culture to local people in Missoula. Every year, she would help to celebrate Hmong New Year and invited people to join this festival. When I talked about my impression of her fame after we had grown closer, she laughed.

“We have only a small Hmong community here, so everybody knows everybody,” said Thao. “I just try to do whatever I can do to preserve our culture.”

### **Struggling**

Almost every Hmong person in Missoula knows that the presence of Hmong people here is an interesting story: A Bitterroot smoke jumper in Missoula, Jerry Daniels, joined

the CIA during the 1960s and 1970s. When the U.S. ended its support for the Hmong people after the failure of the Vietnam War, Daniels brought many Hmong people to Missoula, buying land for them and helping them live here.

Currently, there are about 30 Hmong families and about 200 Hmong people living in Missoula. Most are children. Few elderly are left; many of them have passed away or moved out due to serious economic problems.

“This past summer we lost three families,” said Thao. “They moved to other states to find jobs.”

Most of the elderly Hmong speak little English and received no education in the U.S. It’s hard for them to find jobs in Missoula. Almost all of them have moved to Minneapolis where a large population of Hmong and more factories can provide more job opportunities.

Like most Hmong elderly in Missoula, Thao’s parents are refugees from Laos, but they were not brought here by Daniels. They swam across the river from Laos to the refugee camp in Thailand with other Hmong people. Some of them didn’t make it to their destination. Luckily, Thao’s parents arrived at the camp safely. Later, they immigrated to the U.S.

Hmong people in Missoula have their own way of counting generations, depending on whether they or their parents were born in the U.S. or in Laos. So Thao who was born in America but whose parents are refugees is counted as a first generation Hmong in Missoula. Her aunt who came to Missoula in her 13<sup>th</sup> year is counted as one and a half generations. Following this rule, Thao’s kids (she is still single) and nephews will be counted as the second generation Hmong people in Missoula.

Since Thao is the first generation of Hmong born in Missoula, she was among the first generation that began to face the challenge of growing up in both Hmong and American cultures. Many times during her childhood, she felt she was special.

Like many other children, she went to regular American school from Monday through Friday. But after school, on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, she had to take Hmong class, which was a kind of after-school program for Hmong kids where she and others learned the Hmong language. On Friday, from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m., they had Hmong culture class.

It was a busy schedule. She felt that she had lost most of her free time to relax or do things she wanted to do. Since the written language of Hmong has been missing for centuries, they only learned to speak Hmong in their classes. It was very hard for Thao. She needed to practice the language a lot to catch up with the class. She tried to argue with her parents, complained and even cried many times, but her parents insisted that she continue the classes.

“They just said that it was really important to take those classes,” said Thao.

At the time, Thao didn’t know how hard the community had worked to get this program established. She didn’t even think to appreciate the class that helped her keep her Hmong language skills or those people in the community who always helped with the classes.

“There were people in the community who really wanted Hmong kids to speak their language and be a part of Hmong culture,” said Thao. “So they found funding to hire the Hmong teachers. They were usually the elderly Hmong who had teaching experience in Laos and then taught here.”

Before moving to Missoula, Thao lived with her family in Milwaukee, Wis., which has a large population of Hmong. It was so diverse there that Thao used to play with everyone. But she didn't know every Hmong.

"There are so many Hmong people there that you didn't need to have to know everyone and you didn't need to say 'hi' to everyone," said Thao.

In Missoula, however, the small Hmong community made every Hmong family stays close to one another, like relatives and good friends.

"Growing up here, you knew everyone and you had to be friends with everyone," said Thao.

Thao used to go to Big Sky High School every day with many of her "cousins." Only one was her real cousin. Other kids were from other Hmong families that her family was close to. They took regular classes, Hmong language and culture classes, and played together everyday. They grew up like brothers and sisters.

"Missoula is a really small city," said Thao. "Going to school here you kind of knew everyone. Every time people mentioned that they knew some Hmong, I would ask 'who?' I did know every Hmong people here."

Thao also had many white friends at her school.

"We all know that 94 percent of the population here are whites," said Thao. "You can't isolate yourself from them or you will be weird."

However, Thao did feel the differences when she hung out with her white friends and Hmong friends. She always felt more familiar with and more connected to her Hmong friends. They teased each other and pinched each other as they played with their own sisters and brothers.

“With Hmong kids, there is more of a sense of family,” said Thao. “We did a lot of hard teasing in Hmong culture. If I don’t tease you, that means I don’t like you.”

Even with Asian people in general, Thao still could sense this kind of “familiar” feeling. She used to work with a Korean family in Missoula. They began to joke with each other the first day they met. She felt like they were just like her family members.

“With Asian people, I always felt connected to them already,” Thao said.

Thao was not able to give an accurate explanation for the natural “close” feeling, but she did notice one thing leading up to it: language. She found that she could express something in Hmong language, but really couldn’t find a word to express it in English. So she could talk to her Hmong friends but couldn’t talk to her white friends because of the language differences.

“It was not that I was struggling with English or struggling with Hmong,” said Thao. “I could do both. It’s just the language.”

With Hmong friends, Thao sometimes spoke ‘Hmonglish.’ They used Hmong language and English together to talk to each other. They really enjoyed this creation, which no one but they could understand.

Thao realized that it was their similar background that made the communication between her and her Hmong friends much easier.

“We kind of had a similar past in that our parents all came to this country,” said Thao. “We had a shared sense of history and identity. And that made it easier to know somebody from the beginning.”

During her days at Big Sky High School, Thao met many good teachers who helped her a lot with her study and life. Every teacher, in her eyes, was different. There were



some teachers who wouldn't mention anything about her background and ancestry. They didn't point out the fact that she was an Asian and didn't want her to feel that she was different from other kids at school.

There were other teachers, however, who really made a point to teach about Hmong culture and Hmong history in class. She used to have a history teacher who always mentioned stories about the Vietnam War and specifically talked about Hmong history. At that time, some kids in the class would turn over and look at Thao. And Thao, at the same time, would feel very proud of herself.

"I would just realize that it was the story about my dad and my grandpa," said Thao. "This is my kind of history and this is what I had learned growing up."

Thao liked both kinds of teachers, those who reminded her of her Hmong identity, and also those who did not make her feel that she was that special. She found that at times not feeling different was important while growing up, yet she also appreciated those teachers who mentioned Hmong people and Hmong culture in the classes because that would give her fellow students a better idea about the Hmong community here.

Hmong people didn't start coming to the U.S. until 1976. Historically, they are still new to this country. After almost 30 years of Hmong in Missoula, more people in this city are getting used to seeing those black-haired and tan-skinned people. They may not be curious about those people living here anymore. At the same time, however, fewer people seem to know who they are and why they are here.

"I grew up not hearing so much about Hmong around except from other Hmong," said Thao.

Usually, when she told people that she was Hmong, people would ask questions like “Where is that?” “Is that Mongolia?” Then she would explain to them some history about Hmong.

“So I didn’t feel special that I was important, but special when some people other than Hmong talked about Hmong culture,” Thao said. “I am like, oh, they are talking about me.”

At other moments, Thao also felt that she was a little different. When the class talked about racism, the students always looked at Thao as if she was the spokesman. She was very confused. She wanted to be as normal as other kids in the school. On the other hand, she had to face the fact that she was different from other kids or she was always reminded to face the fact by her surroundings.

“It’s really a struggle when I sort of feel special when I hear about my group, but at the same time ... I [don’t] feel like I have to speak for my group,” Thao said.

Thao thought she didn’t represent all of the Hmong community and was not wholly representing Hmong culture.

“It’s sort of a balance between feeling special and not wanting to stand out, of how do I feel very special, at the same time how do I not to want to stand out,” Thao said.

“It’s really hard to figure out for me and maybe for other people who are also a minority in this country.”

Though sometimes she felt a little confused, her days in school are a good memory for Thao. To her, Missoula was good place to grow up. Most of the people here are friendly. She loves the city, but there have been times when she felt it was unsafe.

“When I tell people that I have experienced racism here, they don’t believe it,” Thao smiled. “But it did happen to me.”

It was the year Thao was in the seventh grade. She was still taking the Hmong language and culture classes every week. At home, her parents insisted she only Hmong or they wouldn’t answer her. One day, she went to a store with her little brother. When Thao said something to her little brother in Hmong, an old white woman and her daughter walked past them.

She said to Thao: “This is America, speak English.”

“It was weird for a kid to have her parents tell her to speak Hmong, and at the same time have people, the majority of the population, saying ‘this is America, speak English,’” said Thao. “It was really confusing.”

Several times, when Thao was walking on Higgins by herself or with her Hmong friends, people shouted at them, “go back to China!” or said “chin-chang” behind her, trying to imitate their language. While shopping at Wal-Mart with her grandma, who hadn’t seen a white person until she came to the U.S., the cashiers always rolled their eyes and stared at them when Thao had to translate.

“Those were subtle things that had happened, but they gave you the feeling that something here wasn’t right,” Thao said.

### **Searching**

From the time she was a child to when she became a graduate student, Thao has been searched for a proper way to explain herself. She found it’s complicated that people always assumed that she was not from here in the first place. Therefore, she found that she couldn’t explain herself in one or two sentences. Even though she introduced herself

to some people, still many other people would ask the same questions and assumed that she was a foreigner because of her color.

Like those guys on Higgins, many guys in her high school used to always say, “Go back to China.” And she would say, “I am not from China.” Then people would continue to ask: “Where are you from?” Big Sky High School was right across the street from Community Hospital where Thao was born. Thao would answer: “I was born right across the street. Where were you born?”

“This is the part I have been struggling with since I was very little,” said Thao.

Entering the University of Montana, which has few Asian Americans on campus, Thao had professors who assumed that she was an international student. Every time she turns her paperwork in to Human Resources, they always ask Thao for her visa and documentation.

“I have to always say ‘I was born here and I have a passport,’” Thao said.

She became very upset because there was always an automatic assumption that she was a foreigner.

One day, she went to a building on campus for a job. The woman at the office wanted the information for her visa. Thao told her that she didn’t have one. The woman then said that she couldn’t work here without the visa documents. Thao told the woman that she was born in America. The questions were never ending.

“The whole time she was talking to me she was really slow and loud, which makes me feel very uncomfortable,” Thao said. “It was fine with me if it’s how she spoke, but soon I realized that maybe it’s how she spoke to international students, you know.”

On campus, when the majority of Asian students were from Japan and Korea several years ago, Thao was asked, “Are you from Japan or China?” With the increase in the number of Korean students studying in UM in recent years, people now ask, “Are you from Japan, China or Korea?”

Always being assumed to be a foreigner, Thao sometimes felt impatient and didn’t want to answer questions she has answered thousands of times. Before coming to the University of Montana, Thao went to the University of Utah for a while. One day, she went into the elevator with her friend. As she pushed the button, a guy came into the elevator and asked, “Are you Chinese?”

“I was like, I have no idea who you are, and we were in the elevator for just 12 seconds,” said Thao. “I know he had the right to ask me, but I was like ‘you don’t want to know my life story.’ I didn’t know if I should share it with him.”

For Thao, it was not easy to answer those questions about her identity with one or two sentences. The issues is complicated.

“For Hmong people, we don’t have a country,” said Thao. “We started from all over in Asia and that would confuse people even more. So it’s just constant.”

But Thao said that she has had a system for answering people’s questions, and it goes like this:.

Person: Where are you from?

Thao: Missoula.

Person: No, seriously, where are you from?

Thao: Missoula.

Person: where are your parents from?

Thao: They are from Laos.

Person: Oh, so you are Laotian.

Thao: No, I am not

“Many people are confused because their ideas of nationality are connected to ethnicity,” she said.

“Lots of people ask about my nationality; I said America because that’s the nation where I was born.” Thao said. “But if they ask what’s your ethnicity, I said Hmong. If they ask me where are you from, I would say Missoula.”

Thao didn’t know how to better answer those questions because she was always confused by them, too. She thought she was the same as other American kids, but she is also a Hmong kid who speaks Hmong and was greatly influenced by Hmong culture.

“We used to do a survey called ‘Who you are’ in my class,” said Thao. “Then I found I could use many words to describe myself: ‘I am a Hmong, an Asian, an Asian American, and Hmong American...”

I still don’t know which is the best way to address myself.”

### **Contradiction**

Growing up in two cultures was not an easy thing for Thao. She needed to adjust to the contradiction she encountered from the two cultures.

“Gender is a good example,” said Thao. “Being a woman in American culture is very different from being a women in Hmong culture.”

In Hmong culture, women have distinct roles from men in the society and there are specific gender roles to tell what women should do and what men should do. As with other Asian cultures, Hmong women do most of the housework taking care of home while Hmong men would go out to work.

Thao grew up in Hmong culture, but at the same time she went to regular school every day and learned about women's liberation and feminism, and women's role in American culture.

"I identify myself as a strong feminist after I learned that way of thinking," said Thao. "I began to think about how to continue being a Hmong woman and continue being a feminist at the same time."

At the time, Thao still went to Hmong culture class every week in which she had already experienced the difference between men and women in Hmong society. In the class, the teachers asked Hmong girls and boys to practice different things. Thao always asked the teacher why she couldn't do things as boys did. The teachers would tell her "that's only for men."

"I felt kind of mad, you know," said Thao, "because in school, you were taught women's liberation."

Hmong teachers kept explaining to Thao that women did their things and men did their things, but both of them are important and good. It is not that one is better than the other.

"It took me a long time to trust and actually believe that women sewing clothing is as important as men doing hunting because if there were no clothes, men would go naked hunting," Thao flashed a smile. "It's a partnership."

After talking with the teachers, the first thing Thao started to look at was her family. She used to think women who usually did housework like her mother didn't have the same social status as men did in the society. But when she took another look at her family, she soon found that even though both her mom and her dad have different

specific roles in the house, they are equally important for the family. If neither of them do their jobs, the house would fall apart.

“It’s separate but then it’s on a balance,” said Thao.

Thao herself has also experienced challenges in continuing her education because of cultural differences. In Hmong culture, marriage is a very important issue for women, and as a graduate student in UM, Thao is at the age that most elderly Hmong expect her to be married. However, Thao decided to go on with her studies at school.

“I thought about my education and decided to delay my life a little bit and get married later,” said Thao. “It’s unconventional.”

At school, Thao was taught that a woman needs to work for her, but on the other hand, Hmong people didn’t understand why she didn’t get married. Hmong people just came to this country and most of the elderly didn’t go to school as did the young generation of Hmongs. Therefore, many people in the community would ask Thao why she didn’t get married. Even Thao’s mom kept telling her that if she got married she could have a better life.

“My mom told me that she wanted me to get married and have kids so that when I died they could bury me in the right way,” said Thao. “She said both she and my father could not live forever to take care of me.”

In the beginning, Thao felt very uncomfortable to hear her elders lecture her about marriage. In her eyes, the Hmong elderly were so traditional that they wanted to tell her how to handle her life. She thought the reason they all wanted her to get married was because they wanted her to stick to the tradition that women should get married earlier. As a person who grew up in both cultures, she couldn’t endure this as a regular Hmong



woman. She wanted to be herself--- a modern Hmong woman who will control her own destiny.

Later, when her family decided to respect her choice to go to graduate school and told her that they loved her, Thao began to rethink those concerns about her marriage. She tried to listen to those voices from a different perspective. Maybe they weren't so much pressuring her to get married, as showing their love, worry and hope that they wanted Thao to be taken care of and be happy.

"I began to think about what family means in Hmong culture," said Thao. "It's to sustain the culture and the community as families. They thought if I got married, I would get to have people who love me around."

After that, Thao found that those questions about her marriage were not sharp to her ear any more: they just wanted her to be taken care of and it was a way for the elderly to express their love.

Regardless of the fact that she had some difficulties receiving two different cultural educations, Thao chose to digest them by trying to understand both of the cultures deeper. She didn't want to bring them to the front and show her parents or other elderly in the community. She didn't expect, however, her brother's marriage to break the peace of the family first.

According to old Hmong traditions, Hmong should only marry Hmong. Historically, Hmong lived in the mountain areas which were usually completely isolated. Therefore, inter-marriage was not a choice. But inside of the community, you have to choose a person to marry who doesn't share the same family name.

When Thao's parents were expecting her handsome brother to bring back a Hmong girl to the house, they saw an American girl, Nicole.

"Actually, many Hmong youth began to date Americans here," said Thao. "Things are different now. We are not isolated now and we are in America. You can be attracted to different people."

But initially it was really hard for Thao's parents to accept all this. Thao's brother was the oldest son in the family, the one who usually has to take on the duty of being in charge of the whole family in the future. Now that their eldest son was going to marry an American girl, they were very worried that the Thao family could still last as a typical Hmong family. They were worried that their grandsons would be able to speak the Hmong language in the future.

What Thao's parents were worried most about was divorce. Hmong people are very serious about their marriage. Traditionally, "divorce" is a taboo word for Hmong. Thao's parents argue and quarrel, but they have never threatened each other with divorce. Even though more and more young Hmong have been getting divorced in recent years, they didn't want their oldest son to do the same thing and treat marriage as easily as it was in many American movies. Therefore, Thao's parents didn't talk to Nicole that much when they first met.

Thao respected her brother's decision. She wanted to help and say something to her parents. But she didn't know how to start.

Luckily, Nicole worked hard to get into the Hmong family. She always came to help Thao's mother for celebrations. She killed chickens and did dirty work as other Hmong

women did. Thao was really surprised to see her determination. She then found a way to help her.

“Every time I would asked her so loud like ‘Are you ready to kill a chicken’ to get my parents’ attention,” said Thao. “She didn’t know that and always answered ‘Oh, let me try’ or ‘Let me do it. That’s very cute.’”

Soon, Thao’s parents were very touched by Nicole’s effort and sincerity. They realized that Nicole was serious about this marriage. They finally agreed to the marriage and accepted Nicole as their daughter-in-law.

To make Thao’s parents happy and be a real Hmong bride, Nicole decided to have a traditional Hmong wedding first and then another American wedding later. Thao’s parents were very happy to hear this. They then began to prepare the special wedding.

However, things don’t always go as smoothly as we want. Due to the two different cultural traditions, this special marriage was a good chance for each side to learn more about each other’s culture.

According to American culture, the groom’s parents would arrange and pay for the rehearsal dinner. In Hmong culture, however, the most important day is the wedding day. There should be nothing more important that happens before the big day so there should not be a meeting of two sides before the wedding. Therefore, Thao’s father didn’t want to go to the dinner. She felt that it was time for her to use her bi-culture education to persuade her father to do the dinner.

“Dad, Nicole did everything you wanted to be a good Hmong bride and now you have to do this (the dinner) in respect to her culture,” said Thao to her dad.

Thao's father was a little surprised to hear her always-quiet daughter talk to him like that. He told Thao that he would think it over. Thao's father is a notable elderly and a master of Hmong culture. If anyone had questions about Hmong culture, they would come to visit him. Now he had to face the challenge about the culture raised by his son's wedding.

Thao still remembers seeing her father the day after they had talked. She noticed the puffiness and black circles around his eyes---he hadn't slept well. He asked Thao if she knew any good restaurants in Missoula.

"My dad is very serious about culture," said Thao. "When you told him that something is about culture, he would consider it deeply."

A few days later, Thao's brother had his grand wedding. It looked very much like an international banquet. It had both a large group of black-haired Hmong people from the groom's side, and a group of blonde-haired American people from the bride's side. For both sides, they may have never seen so many of each other before.

"My grandma didn't see a white person until she came to America," said Thao. "It was her first time sitting with so many white people at the wedding."

Nicole's parents seemed to get used to Hmong culture very nicely. They followed every step as the Hmong elderly in the Hmong traditional marriage. According to Hmong culture, they will be the elderly of Thao and Thao's little sister and brother, who will call them "dad" and "mom" instead of by their names. They looked very happy to have those new daughters and sons.

It was really a great experience for Thao, not only because it was her brother's wedding, but also because she realized for the first time in her life her power as a person

who has a bi-cultural education. She was proud to be a Hmong but also to be an American.

“I don’t think I could put any of that aside,” said Thao.

Those experiences led her to believe that maybe she could do more for the Hmong community with her two cultural backgrounds.

### **Opportunity**

In recent years, with many Hmong families moving out, the Hmong community in Missoula is facing the danger of assimilation. More and more young generation Hmong were born here. At the same time many Hmong elderly who can speak Hmong language and know Hmong culture very well have passed away.

Thao found that many young Hmong in Missoula have been assimilated into American culture, even at the risk of losing touch with their heritage. She had some Hmong friends who could not speak Hmong at all. They even speak English to their parents.

“I think the majority (of Hmong) have assimilated and it’s very hard to hold on to one culture in America partly because the policy doesn’t support it,” said Thao. “If you go to school, you hear English eight hours a day. The only time to hear the foreign language is at Hmong classes you have to take, but no kids want to take them.”

Thao knew that language is very important to a culture. But the problem of the younger generation Hmong here is that it’s much easier to live in the U.S. as American kids than Hmong kids who have to learn Hmong language.

“If you don’t know the language, you would not understand those rituals and if there are no rituals, there is no Hmong culture,” Thao said. “But for many of them, it’s so exhausting to go to Hmong classes after school and think about ‘who you are.’”

Not only for those kids, for their parents, it’s also tough work. Last year, some Hmong families moved to Lolo and Hamilton. They felt that it was hard to drive their kids to Hmong classes here in Missoula after work. They were too tired to do that. Even Thao’s nephews and niece who are very little and still stay at home are facing the same problems. Thao’s grandma is watching them every day at home.

“But my grandma is too old to chase them,” said Thao. “She usually turns on the TV and let them watch the English programs.”

Thao felt a little helpless, but she decided to change the situation or at least help Hmong kids to see the danger of losing their Hmong culture. Last summer she taught Hmong language and culture classes. She always told those kids in her class that it’s up to them to keep Hmong culture alive.

“I always said ‘This is serious,’” said Thao. “If this language dies, the culture would die and nobody will know who we are.”

However, many Hmong kids including one of her nephews always complained how tough it was on them to have to go to the Hmong culture classes. Thao’s nephew needs to go to Hmong class almost every day after his regular school plus there is a Hmong language class on Saturday. He told Thao: “I am only 14 and there is so much work for me. Why it is up to me to keep my culture alive? That’s hard.” Thao always gets emotional when she responds to these kinds of complaints.

“I always said, ‘You have to! That’s just the way it is.’”

Thao was crying and telling the kids the importance of taking the culture classes. She told the Hmong kids that she trusted them to keep this culture alive.

“When the elderly are long gone, and I am long gone, you will be the leaders of this community and keep this culture alive and now is the moment to decide if you want to take this responsibility.”

Some Hmong kids would be very touched and would reply, “I will be the one and I will do it,” while others still didn’t care. Thao knew that she couldn’t make every kid realize the importance of keeping the Hmong culture by taking the Hmong classes, but she was happy to see that some of them were willing to take the responsibility. She believed that “Little chips light great fires.”

Thao has some friends who didn’t care about their native culture but then were regretful when they grew up. She has a 30-year-old Chinese friend who just went back to Hong Kong to enter a Mandarin language school there. Both she and her parents felt a little embarrassed about this. They could have started it earlier. The parents regretted that they didn’t insist that she speak Mandarin at home. She could barely speak any Chinese. They were also excited that she finally wanted to learn it: It’s never too late. But it became much harder.

This experience reinforced Thao’s decision that she will try her best to make Hmong kids learn Hmong culture and language. To understand better about her culture and to further study about Hmong people, she has chosen Hmong culture as the research theme of her graduation paper. She has decided to go back to Laos this coming New Year. Although the trip back to Laos is really tough (Missoula—Salt Lake—Los Angeles---Seoul—Bangkok---Laos), Thao is looking forward to it very much.

“I have never been to Laos before,” said Thao. “All the research about Hmong I did was just on the basis of my experience growing up in Missoula. Hmong were from Laos. I want to go back to see the lives of other Hmong people there.”

Thao’s mother was an orphan in Laos before coming to Missoula. She has never been back, either. Thao said it is very important to go back with her parents to listen to their stories and to see where they used to be in the country.

“It’s very tragic for both of my parents to go back to the country,” said Thao. “America left Laos after the Vietnam War, so Hmong people who supported America had to escape on their own. I want it to be symbolic in a way that my mom can tell other people that she made it.”

### **Epilogue**

Recently, some men in the Hmong community in Missoula decided to teach some traditional instruments to Hmong boys. Thao was curious about why they started so late. One of the elders in the community told her that they had thought they would be able to go home.

“They thought they just temporarily came to this country and would go back later,” said Thao.

However, over 30 years passed. Many Hmong elderly have passed away but the Hmong are still here. They realized that they were not going back. They had committed to this area and fought the tough Missoula weather as they farmed. Even though Montana’s mountains made them feel at home, some of them still missed their real home. Thao’s aunt told her that she always had a scene of going back to Laos in her mind. But



when Thao thought about it, she found that she was different from her aunt. To Thao, this “going back” issue is very complicated.

“Part of me would think what would it look like to go back but the other part of me would think what would I lose if I go back,” said Thao.

Thao said she appreciated that the U.S. government opened the door to the Hmong refugees, but at the same time, she was very grateful to her parents because they swam across the river and give her the chance to live in this country.

“I couldn’t imagine what I would be doing if I were still in Laos,” said Thao.

She still has one year in graduate school. But she has found what she wants to do in the future --- working with Hmong kids and kids from various other cultural ethnicities and helping them with their identity issue. She feels that it is very important for their growing up.

“I think if you have a strong sense of identity and a positive sense of identity, it really builds your realization and helps you with your adult life,” said Thao. “I really want to keep on doing that kind of work. Not that I want to become a president, but I would like to change a lot.”

Thao went back to Laos from December 2008 to January 2009 with her mother and father. She had expected to learn how they preserved the Hmong culture there, but what she found is much different from what she imagined. They visited the local Hmong community in her hometown, which is a small village not far from Vientiane, the capital of Laos. People there told them that it is difficult for Hmong people to keep their language because at school their children only learn Laotian and have few chances to speak Hmong.

“They told us, ‘We are not doing anything and you are the people who are doing this good work,’” said Thao. “We were really surprised.”

Thao’s 18-year-old cousin in Laos learned the Hmong language through DVDs and the radios. Compared with Thao, she didn’t know the grammar and characters, but only memorized the pronunciations. Thao felt that she learned the language in a more systematic way in Missoula. She therefore realized that it is a more urgent task for her to preserve the Hmong culture and Hmong language in the U.S.

“They seemed not have enough time and funds to hold on the Hmong culture there, even though they really want to keep them,” said Thao. “Then it is a huge responsibility for us to do it.”

Thao’s trip to Laos was also really emotional. She and her parents met many of her relatives who are still living in Laos. Since she is the first person in her generation in Missoula’s Hmong community to go back to Laos, she re-connects the young generation Hmong in both places.

“I met many of my cousins there and we stayed together all the time,” smiled Thao. “We wouldn’t known each other if I didn’t go back.”

Feeling lucky to have another family in Laos, Thao re-emphasized the greater responsibility she feels that she needs to take:

“We need to keep in touch with them, take care of them as much as we can, and make sure that they are doing good in the other side of the world.”

Thao is hoping to revisit Laos in 2010.



Hmong

Korea



# ON THE ROAD

## Struggling, Searching, and Opportunities

Stories of searching culture identities from the young generation  
Asians in Missoula






# Introduction

- Why “On The Road?”
- Who “On The Road?”
- For what purposes?

# The outlines

- I am American, I love Korea 
- I am a Hmong American
- **Landmarks on the Road**: Struggling –the process of **defining identities**, searching-the journey to **fulfillment**, and experiencing-the opportunities and **growth** on the road

# Addie Rogness



- Why her?
- Her story
  - Struggling: 1) look different 2) who is she? 3) angry easily—quiet after school
  - Searching 1) get hold of birth parents 2) first visit to Seoul
  - Opportunity 1) come-back visit/study 2) stay with the birth family 3) decide what to do next



# Addie Rogness



# Family matters (fb album)





# Kao Nou Thao

- As a Hmong American in Missoula
- Struggling: more invisible; assimilation; assumed Asian; imposed/self identity
- Searching: making sense of being “her” (pattern)
- Growing up in contradiction (brother’s marriage, candy shop, women)
- Experiencing: took the opportunity to preserve the Hmong culture; back to Laos to find culture heritage--





## Patterns to answer Q

Person: Where are you from?

Thao: Missoula

Person: No, seriously, where are you from?

Thao: Missoula

Person: Where are your parents from?

Thao: They are from Laos

Person: Oh, so you are Laotian

Thao: No, I am not

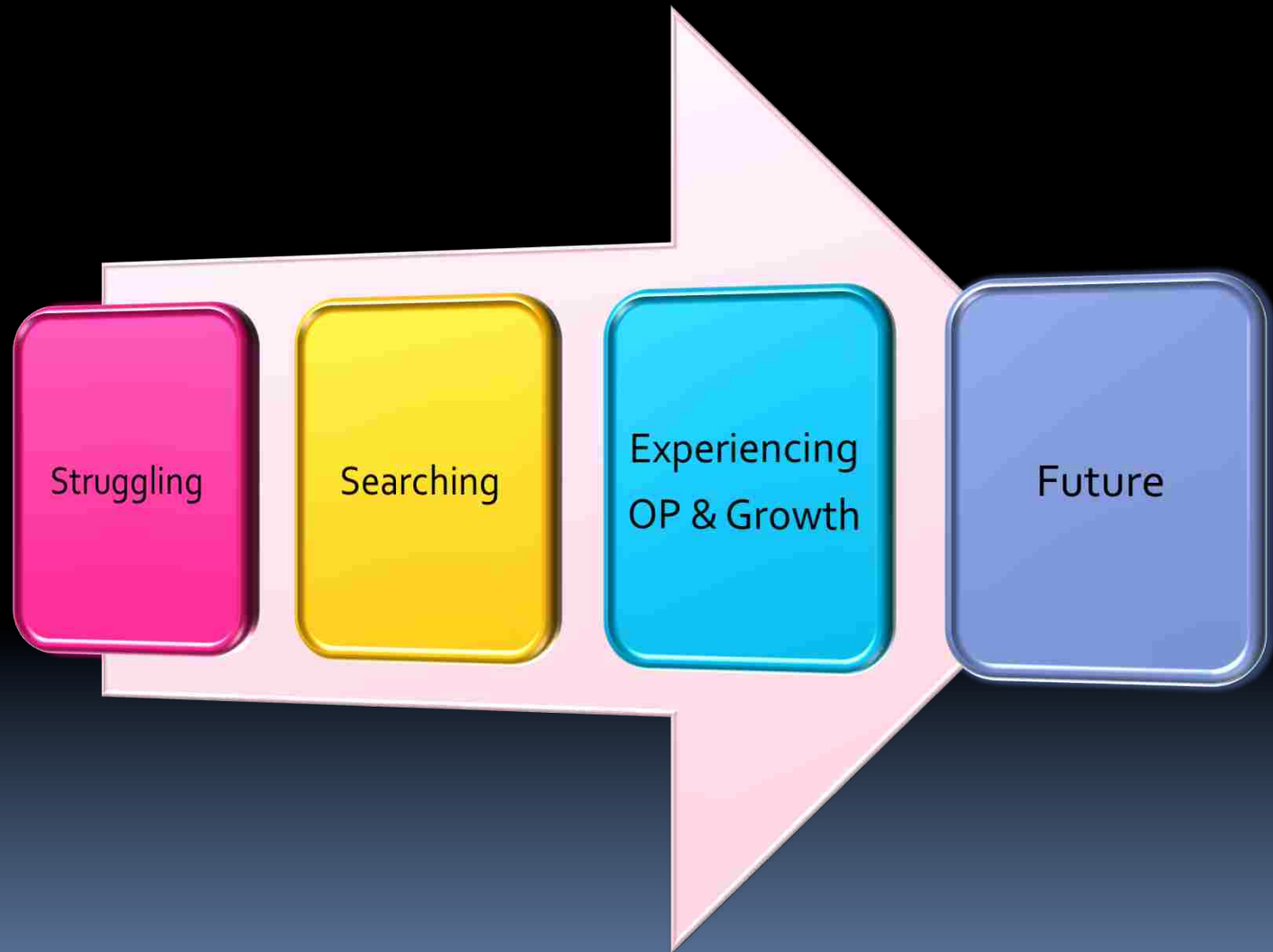
.....their ideas of nationality are connected to  
ethnicity

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# Summary



Thank you!

