

## Korean adoption history

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International adoption, the movement of children from predominantly non-Western countries to adoptive parents in the West, was initiated on a large scale in connection with the Korean War (Benet, 1976: 120-136). International adoption from Korea is intimately linked to the decline of traditional Korean society and the dispersal of people of Korean ethnicity from the Korean peninsula. Starting with the collapse of the Chosŏn dynasty, and escalating during the colonial era, this dispersal reached its peak with the national division and the civil war and reached its conclusion with the rise of post-war industrialisation. All of these dramatic, and in all respects, tragic events took place within less than a century and in the course of three generations, affecting every Korean individual struggling to survive and causing extreme strain on every Korean family trying to stay together in the chaos.

The modern exodus of Korean people began in the year 1860, due to the outbreak of famine and the impoverished conditions of the northern provinces (Lee Kwang-kyu, 2000: 6-13). The first wave of emigrants found their way to the Russian Far East territory (bordering present day's North Korea), and from 1869 Koreans started to pour into Chinese Manchuria in great numbers. From 1881, Korean students went over to Japan, and, in 1903, emigration to the U.S. was initiated through indentured labour. These four countries, Russia (later Soviet Union and Central Asia), China, Japan and the U.S., have since then been the most important host countries for the Korean diaspora (Back, 2001; Cui, 1990; Hurh, 1998; Lee Kwang-kyu, 1993; Ryang, 2001).

The colonial period, with its extreme migration patterns (see Kim and Sloboda, 1981), changed Korean society irrevocably as the country and its people were ruthlessly exploited by imperial Japan. At the time of Japanese surrender, altogether 4 million Koreans—an astonishing 16 percent of the entire population—were to be found outside the peninsula, while a total of 40 percent of the adult population had been uprooted and dislocated (Eckert et al., 1990: 322). Altogether 266,000 Korean males were mobilised for labour service (*kyosei renko*) in Japan, while 320,000 were drafted as military personnel and stationed within the extensive Japanese Empire. A total of 70,000 of these men died from hardships, during war operations or as unintentional victims of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Dower, 1986: 297; Ryang, 1998; Yoneyama, 1995). In addition, tens of thousands of young girls had been forced to serve as comfort women (*chŏngsindae*) in the Japanese army of whom a minority survived and returned to Korea after the war (Kim Hyun Sook, 1997; Kim-Gibson, 1999; Yoshiaki, 1995).

For Koreans, 1945 would mean liberation from Japanese rule, occupation by American and Russian troops, partition along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, repatriation and resettlement of countrymen from the collapsing Japanese Empire, and the beginning of massive internal migration movements (Lee Hyo-Jae, 1985). In 1948, the division was formalised by the establishment of two contending dictatorial regimes, both systematically purging its ideological opponents and causing further mass killings and floods of refugees. Lastly, the Korean War, a civil war that became an international conflict between the Cold War superpowers, resulted in something close to genocide with 3.5-4 million soldiers and civilians being killed on both sides, representing 10-15 percent of the entire ethnic Korean population (Halliday & Cumings, 1988: 200-201; Hong Sung-Won, 2000).

The various ways of calculating the magnitude of these movements of people between 1945-53 have been considered by Kim Choong Soon (1988) and James Foley

(2001, 2002) in their studies of separated families, and by Shin Eui Hang (2001) in a paper on the effects of the war. According to Korea's leading demographer and most reliable source, Kwon Tai Hwan, as many as 2.6 million people ended up in South Korea during those years, eventually constituting 14 percent of the population. Of these, 1.4 million had been repatriated from every corner of the Japanese empire, and 1.2 million were refugees coming from North Korea, while 300,000 took the other direction and went to the North.

These historical events and social contexts are prerequisites to understanding international adoption from Korea. Statistics for institutionalised children given by the Church World Service social welfare consultants Charles Chakerian (1968: 40-44) and Helen Miller (1971) are revealing. In 1945, when Japanese rule ended, there were just 38 child welfare institutions in the country inhabited by 3,000 children, while at the outbreak of the war in 1950 after repatriation and refugee movements from the North, those numbers had increased to 215 institutions and 24,945 children. Finally, in post-war Korea of 1957, five years after the armistice and the separation and destruction of numerous families, there were 482 institutions and 48,594 children living there.

The first Western-style orphanages were set up by missionaries in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and numerous others were established by soldiers during the war (Ch'oe Wôn-kyu, 1996; Paik Lak-Geon George, [1927] 1980). Out of 273 child welfare facilities existing in 2002, 177 were established before 1960 and as many as 144 in the 1950s, of which the absolute majority can be attributed to Westerners (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2001). Ch'oe Wôn-kyu argues in his study of foreign voluntary agencies in Korea that the introduction of charitable and philanthropic social welfare facilities by missionaries in the 1890s followed by military relief activities for refugees during the war actually laid the foundation for modern Korean social work and its focus on private and institutional care, thereby preventing the formulation of comprehensive social policy and planning.

It is even possible to say that modern Western aid and assistance to developing countries actually was established after the Korean War, as so many of these practices—including sponsoring, fostering and adopting of children, the setting up of hospitals and orphanages, and educational and technical assistance—were tested in Korea for the first time (Alvernaz & Tieszen, 1958; Molumphy, 1984: 107-134; Tieszen, 1966). In this way, Korea became heavily dependent on foreign resources and private initiatives inhibiting the development of its own social welfare system. For instance, facilities received more support from foreign voluntary agencies if they had more children, thereby creating economic incentives for orphanage directors to take in as many children as possible.

### **Children of war**

The children of Korea suffered enormously during the war as Seoul changed hands four times and armies marched back and forth across the small peninsula, ravaging the country and causing tremendous destruction. Already in 1951, the United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency estimated the number of orphaned children to number 100,000, and in 1953 there were 293,000 widowed women caring for 516,000 children under the age of thirteen (Republic of Korea National Red Cross, 1977: 71; Ressler, Boothby & Steinbock, 1988: 37-43). In 1954, when Western relief organisations started to arrive in the country, a total of 2 million people under the age of 18 had been displaced from their homes (International Union for Child Welfare, 1954).

The immediate response among the soldiers to the miserable plight of orphaned children was a whole mixture of evacuations, fundraising drives for food and clothing, the setting up of orphanages, and, most importantly, the spontaneous incorporation of children into care at military bases as regimental mascots, houseboys or interpreters. In many cases,

these relationships developed into a kind of informal adoption (Tise, 1992). For example, in 1950 American pilots flew out 950 orphans from Seoul as the city fell to the Northern side and placed them in an orphanage on Cheju Island. Known as "Operation Kiddy Car," this event was later immortalised by Hollywood in the film *Battle Hymn* (1956). Some of those war orphans, among the first to be adopted to the U.S. shortly after the war, have written compelling autobiographies bearing witness to the humanitarian aid the military rendered to Korean children (Anthony, 1960; Park Clement, 1998; White, 1995). \*

Between 1950-53, 1.3 million Americans served in Korea excluding smaller contingents from South Africa, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Ethiopia, France, Great Britain, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the Philippines, New Zealand, Thailand and Turkey, which also took part on South Korea's side in the war as U.N. troops (Halliday & Cumings, 1988; Hastings, 1988). In addition, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, India and Italy participated with military hospitals. Further, 60,000 American soldiers were to stay permanently stationed as the Eighth U.S. Army to protect America's security interests in the Pacific Asian region. As always in times of war, women fall to the lot of conquerors, and the Korean War did not turn out to be an exception to this rule. Not surprisingly, a sexual exploitation of Korean women took place on a mass scale during the war (Hanley, Choe & Mendoza, 2001).

The numerous Korean women who had intimate contacts with foreigners were shunned and stigmatised by the Korean society, as were their children in a country obsessed with miscegenation (National Human Rights Commission of Korea, 2003; Okazawa-Rey, 1997). Consequently, a mass migration of Korean wives of U.S. servicemen started immediately after the war, with 100,000 Korean women moving to America (Hong Sawon, 1982; Kim Bok-Lim, 1972). These women, comprising 10 percent of all ethnic Koreans in the country, have played an important role in Korean-American history as it is estimated that 40-50 percent of all Koreans in the U.S. can trace their immigration to the sponsorship of a wife of an American military man. \*

The products of these unequal and all too often temporary relationships between U.N. soldiers and Korean women, known by the neologisms *Amerasian*, *Eurasian* or GI baby, were often abandoned by both parents and made up a good proportion of the estimated 10,000 children who lived on the streets after the war (Ressler, Boothby & Steinbock, 1988: 37-43). The exact amount of mixed children who were born in Korea during those years is not known (Bowman, Gjenvick & Harvey, 1961: 35-36). Hurh Won Moo (1972) estimates a total of 12,280 born between 1950-65, of whom half ended up being adopted to America or to other Western countries.

The issue of mixed children and war orphans and their difficult conditions in Korea were widely discussed in the Western media and the numbers were often exaggerated (Chakerian, 1962; Miller, 1971). *National Geographic*, *Time*, *Life*, *Readers' Digest*, *Saturday Review* and *Ladies' Home Journal* all published articles about mixed children in Korea, and the Christian relief organisation World Vision made a documentary. In 1954, World Vision's documentary *Other Sheep* toured America to inform the public of the plight of mixed war orphans in Korea. At a meeting in Portland, Oregon, Harry and Bertha Holt met with World Vision's president Dr. Bob Pierce in person. The meeting resulted in the couple's decision to adopt eight mixed children from Korea themselves, and in the end to start their own adoption agency.

The first formal international adoptions of Korean children took place in 1953 under the provision of the Seventh Day Adventists. Authorised by the Korean government, it was made possible by the Refugee Relief Act passed by the American Congress the same year which allowed the dubious practice of proxy adoption (Bowman, Gjenvick & Harvey, 1961: 35; Chakerian, 1968). Yet, it is impossible to say that the four cases processed during the year are the first international adoptions from Korea as there is proof of earlier informal adoptions taking place already during the war.

A *United Press* telegram dated the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1952 states that the 10-year old Rhee Song Wo, one of those numerous orphans who had been taken care of by soldiers, is on his way to his adoptive home in America by a special permission from presidents Truman and Rhee setting aside the then ruling racially based immigration law banning entry of Asians. Other wartime articles mention plans to adopt orphans, and in 1951 American authorities openly warned their soldiers not to become too attached to unofficially adopted children in Korea (*Pacific Stars and Stripes* 8/21/51). In July of 1952, Kim Yoon Joong arrived to San Francisco as the foster son of Mr. And Mrs. Beauchamp. Yoon Joong had been their son Victor's bearer in Korea before he was killed, and Victor's last wish was that his parents would bring the Korean boy to the U.S. Accordingly, an unknown number of Korean children must have ended up in Western countries accompanied by homecoming military and diplomatic personnel, missionaries and relief workers as the first adoptive parents already during the years of war.

The complete absence a legal framework worried the Korean government during these initial wild years of international adoption from Korea when foreign individuals and voluntary agencies considered themselves to be guardians of the country's children. The sheer chaos in war-torn Korea makes it possible to understand how easy and tempting it must have been for U.N. soldiers and other Westerners just to grab any Korean "parentless" child roaming the streets and bring her or him out of the country. In 1952, the Korean government introduced a welfare facilities system and foster parents' plan as a response to the many children orphaned by the war. These steps were to become the beginning of domestic adoption in Korea (Yi Mi-sôn, 2001: 6). In 1955, the National Assembly tried to create a law for international adoption, but the draft was considered too premature (Yi Sôn-ok, 2001: 30). Instead, preparations for a second attempt started from 1957 when the Children's Charter was promulgated which in the end led to the adoption law of 1961.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 1954, with a presidential order and under the patronage of the South Korean First Lady, Francisca Donner, Child Placement Service (*Adongyanghohoe*) was set up with initial grants from abroad and subordinated to the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs for the purpose of providing international adoption of mixed children to the U.S. and other Western countries which had participated on the Southern side in the war (Bowman, Gjenvick & Harvey, 1961: 43-44; Chakerian, 1963: 19-20; Tahk, 1983). Between 1954-57, Child Placement Service worked together with the Geneva based International Social Service, handling child welfare issues since the 1920s, and signed bilateral agreements with the various receiving countries like with Sweden in 1966 (Department of Social Affairs, 1967: 38-41).

In 1955, a third authorised agency entered the scene as Catholic Relief Service began placing Korean children in Catholic families in America. In 1957, International Social Service initiated its own adoption program (discontinued in 1966), and in 1958 Pearl S. Buck's Welcome House also started to adopt children from Korea (Bowman, Gjenvick & Harvey, 1961: 44-45; Miller, 1971). In 1956 the American farmer Harry Holt who, in 1955, had adopted eight mixed children from Korea himself, founded the adoption agency which still bears his name. Holt's agency rapidly developed into both Korea's and the world's dominating organisation in the field of international adoption, placing half of the adoptions from Korea and altogether more than 100,000 children from various non-Western countries (Holt, 1982, [1956] 1992a, 1992b; Holt Children's Services, 1985; Holt International Children's Services, 1992).

Actually it is most likely that without the activities of Holt, international adoption from Korea would never have developed into the gigantic dimensions that it did. From the beginning, according to many vocal critics from the professional adoption field, the Holt agency conducted speedy procedures, overused proxy adoption, making "mail order babies" possible, disregarded minimum standards, chartered whole flights filled up with children which were perceived by many as modern slave ships, and accepted couples who had been

rejected by other agencies, while at the same time prioritising Christian fundamentalists as adoptive parents and paying attention to specifications for age and sex as well as race-matching (Herman, 2002). Harry Holt, having no previous experience at all in child welfare, was instead feverishly driven by a Christian fundamentalist zeal to rescue the children of Korea. Holt, quoting *Isaiah* 43:5, prophetically conceived international adoption to play a part in a divine scheme for the fulfilment of God's will (Holt, [1956] 1992a: 55):

I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth; Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him.

The evangelical couple from Oregon turned into celebrities for their missionary-style emergency program to rescue the mixed children of Korea, and attracted so much attention in both Korea and in the U.S. that many today believe that they not only initiated adoption of Korean children but international adoption itself. Successful lobbying by Holt saw the realisation of the so-called Orphan Bill passed by the American Congress in 1957, thus replacing the temporary Refugee Relief Act and securing the future for international adoption from Korea to the U.S. In 1961, with a congressional amendment of the Immigration and Nationality Act, international adoption was finally given a permanent place in American law. This bill also put a stop to proxy adoption (Breckenridge, 1977).

Between 1953-59, 2,899 Korean children were adopted overseas, excluding missing data from Catholic Relief Service, a small number adopted through American Soul Clinic and the private adoptions going through, for example, staff at the Scandinavian administered National Medical Center and Scandinavian Mission to Korea. Miller (1971) estimated one or two hundred a year, and more than half went through Holt. A majority were mixed as their ratio constituted 70-90 percent until 1959 when full-Korean children started to take over. It was mainly Holt that at an early stage had moved into adoption of full-Korean children as 85 percent of the Seventh Day Adventist placements and 60 percent of those by Child Placement Service were registered as mixed (Bowman, Gjenvick & Harvey, 1961: 41-43). Chin Kim and Timothy Carroll (1975) give the exact number of 4,494 mixed children being adopted abroad between 1958-74, of whom 955 were of African-American origin. The children who left the country during this first stage of international adoption from Korea were predominantly girls, abandoned on the streets during and after the war or relinquished at institutions or directly to adoption agencies (Ministry of Health and Welfare 1999). The main country of destination was the United States where Korean children would dominate international adoption for 38 years in a row. In addition, small numbers had started to arrive in Norway (from 1955), in Sweden (from 1957) and in England (from 1958).

### **The adoption industry**

In 1960, the student uprising of April 19 ended president Syngman Rhee's increasingly autocratic rule, it was followed by a period of democratisation. But the military revolution of 1961 abruptly stopped this short experience with democracy, and installed a dictatorial military regime characterized by harsh oppression of students and workers that was governed by fierce anti-Communism, developmentalism and modernisation theory (Choi Chungmoo, 1995; Shin Gi-Wook, 1998). At the time of the military take-over, Korea was still an agrarian society suffering from typical developing country symptoms of mass poverty and overpopulation. The two principal measures implemented to decrease the population

were family planning and emigration, while international adoption was used as a combination of both (Lee Sea Baick, 1989). Hence, the era of authoritarian regimes with Park Chung Hee (1961-79) and Chun Doo Hwan (1981-87) were to become the years when international adoption witnessed its heydays as three out of four of all placements occurred during the period.

One of the first actions of the military government was to pass the Orphan Adoption Special Law (*Koaibyangt' ŭgryēbōp*), Korea's first modern adoption law, on September 30, 1961, followed by the Child Welfare Act, to facilitate international adoption as an alternative to costly institutional care (Chang Pilwha, 1996; Kim Chin & Carroll, 1975; Tahk, 1986a). Through this decree, a legal basis for international adoption of Korean children was finally established, making private adoptions illegal and establishing a framework for the most effective adoption program in the world with efficient agencies, speedy procedures and secure logistics (Penner, 1996: 35-36; Pyōn, Yi & Kim, 1999: 47-48). After an amendment in 1967, the law stipulated every adoption to take place according to Korean law and through a government licensed agency working closely with a Western counterpart, both of which charged fees to adoptive parents (Tahk, 1986a: 80-81). The agencies mandated for international adoption were expected to employ professional social workers, doctors and nurses to run the orphanages as well as to provide foster care and domestic adoption.

In 1964, Korea Social Service began to process international adoptions and it was the first agency to be entirely run by Koreans. In 1965 Child Placement Service was reorganised as a private agency and renamed Social Welfare Society in 1972 (Tahk, 1983, 1986a). In 1972 Eastern Child Welfare Society was founded as the fourth of the Korean agencies still handling international adoption today. Thus, at the beginning of the 1970s as many as seven agencies operated in the field: Seventh Day Adventists, Child Placement Service, Catholic Relief Service, Holt Children's Services, Korea Social Service, Welcome House and Eastern Child Welfare Society (Chakerian, 1968: 49-57). To balance the numbers of international adoptions, a special agency for domestic adoption was created in 1964. Called Christian Adoption Program in Korea, it was later absorbed by Holt in 1976 (Chakerian, 1968; Miller, 1971; Yi Mi-sōn, 2001: 7). Between 1962 and 1970, a program for domestic adoption was openly promoted, requiring the country's government workers and officials to take care of an orphan. As a result of this compulsory nationalistic campaign, the decade ended as the only one in which domestic adoptions exceeded international ones—8,247 cases versus 6,166 (Chōng & An, 1994: 13).

The family planning program launched in 1962 was to become the most successful population control policy in any developing country in terms of accomplishing the objective of lowering the fertility rate. By the time it was dissolved at the end of the 1980s, the average number of children per woman had decreased from 6.3 in 1960 to 1.6 in 1990 (Kim Son-Ung, 1981; Nam & Ro, 1981). The program included birth control and sex education, the popularisation of different types of contraceptives, economic incentives and tax reductions to persuade families to have less children, a somewhat lenient one child policy, abortion which was made legal in 1973, and the wide use of sterilisation—with more than 200,000 cases registered between 1962-75 (Donaldson, 1981: 251).

The program has been strongly criticised by Korean feminists for its complicity in having restricted the reproductive rights of women while at the same time having preserved the Confucia-based son preference and the male-centred family head registry system of *hojuje* (Cho Hyoun, 1997; Kim Eun-shil, 1996; Lee Hye-kyung, 1994; Oum, 2003). Yeonoak Baik and Jin Young Chung (1996) have identified other ramifications of the program such as a severe disproportion in the sex ratio and a high frequency in abortions. The skewed sex ratio at birth stood at 116.8 in 1990 compared to a normal 106.0, meaning that in 2015 there will be 700,000 extra males in the marriage market, and there are estimates that more than half of all married Korean have experienced an abortion due to son preference. Korea earned the reputation as an "abortion paradise" with one of the



highest abortion ratios in the world (Kim Tai-Hun, 1997; Park Sook-ja, 2001; Tedesco, 1996). In 2003, the Korean birth rate had declined to a mere 1.17 representing the lowest in the world, and it is attributed to a trend in late marriage and a drastic increase in the number of divorces (Lowe-Lee, 2003). This demographic plunge should not come as a surprise after decades of patriarchal population policy in the forms of sex-biased abortions, adoptions and sterilisations, seriously decimating the fertility ratio of the female population, and the fact that tens of thousands of women have left the country for international marriage.

Sending people overseas to countries in need of cheap labour was another method used to decrease the population. From 1962, emigration programs to Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay in Latin America, to West Germany, France and Scandinavia in Europe and to oil producing countries like Saudi Arabia sent tens of thousands of Koreans abroad who contributed to the country's economic development by sending back remittances (Hong & Kim, 1979; Kim Dae Young & Sloboda, 1981: 115-117; Stahl & Arnold, 1986; Yoo, 1996). Many of those who went overseas were actually re-migrants as there are estimates that half of all Koreans in Latin America and a quarter of those in the U.S. originated from the North (Grinker, 1998: 104). Canada, Australia and more recently New Zealand were also popular destinations for Koreans leaving their country (Coughlan, 1995).

The most important host country during the post-war era was to be the United States, receiving three-quarters of those who went overseas and with annual immigration numbers from Korea exceeding 30,000 between 1974-90 (Chang Edward Taehan, 2000; Hurh, 1998; Tomasko, 1996; Yoon In-Jin, 2001). The main reasons for this are of course the country's semi-colonial status in the American world order, together with the 1965 change in American immigration law which since 1924 had discriminated against Asians (Lim, 1985; Takaki, 1998; Wu, 2002). However, contrary to domestic Korean writers, there is a tendency among Korean-American and Asian American scholars to neglect both international adoption and international marriage when accounting for the emigration history even if adoptees and military brides together constitute one in five of all Korean-Americans. These two groups, victims of a combination of American imperialism and Korean patriarchy, almost parallel each other in the statistics and can be seen as physical reminders of the huge power imbalance in the relationship between the two countries (Kim Bok-Lim, 1977; Lowe, 1996). In total, between 1962-77, 300,000 Koreans left the country, with international marriage (16.9 percent), international adoption (14.8 percent), and invitation to work (68.1 percent) as the reasons registered (Hong & Kim, 1979: 42). In total, 1 million Korean citizens have moved to other countries after the Korean War, of whom 15 percent are adoptees and at least as many wives of American soldiers and Western men (Overseas Koreans Foundation, 1999).

Within a period of 30 years from the start of the first five-year economic plan in 1962, the authoritarian developmental state of Korea transformed itself from an agricultural society to a modern industrial nation with an astonishing speed and a horrifying efficiency. Between 1967-76, 6.7 million people migrated from rural areas to the rapidly growing cities involving close to 20 percent of the population as the process of proletarianisation created factory workers out of peasants in barely one generation (Choi Jang Jip, 1995: 28; Song Byung-Nak, 1992). In 1960, 39.9 percent of the population were engaged in agriculture compared to 9 percent in 1990, with 18.6 compared to 44.7 as the equivalent percentage distributions for industry.

An important aspect of Korean industrialisation emphasised by Hagen Koo (2001: 23-45) in his study of the formation of the Korean working-class was the heavy reliance on female labour. The rate of proletarianisation was higher among women than among men – an increase of 7.4 times between 1963-85 has been noted compared to five times for the males. In 1976, women constituted 53 percent of the industrial labour force, and two out of three were unmarried girls between 15-25 years, a fact important to bear in mind when

trying to understand the conditions for international adoption from Korea during those decades, as many of these women were to become biological mothers (Hong Sa-won, 1981; Spencer, 1988).

As a result of the industrialisation of the country and the rapid disappearance of traditional extended family networks, international adoption was supplied by the tens of thousands of Korean children often born to young factory workers (*yógong*) who were abandoned, and declared foundlings in the brutal turmoil of internal migration and urbanisation. The number of abandoned children increased dramatically from 715 in 1955 to 11,319 in 1964 after when it started to slow down, while the number of orphanage inmates reached its peak in 1967 with 71,816 children affiliated to 602 institutions (Miller, 1971). Between 1955-70, a total of 80,520 children were abandoned with urban poverty as the reason stated for half of the cases followed by disability (18.5 percent), family break-up (11.4 percent), neglect by parents (6.7 percent), illegitimacy (5.5 percent) and prostitution (4.5 percent) (Chakerian, 1968: 36-39).

At the end of the 1960s, Korea's international adoption program suddenly gained worldwide popularity. Even if the initial impetus arose out of a rescue mission to adopt mixed children, international adoption had become a last resort for infertile middle-class couples, under pressure to live up to the post-war mandate of building a normative nuclear family. In the West, adoption was legitimised by a left-liberal ideology that framed it as a progressive, anti-racist act of rescuing a destitute child from the "miseries of the Third World", and a way to create a so-called rainbow family (Benet, 1976: 120-126; Kirton, 2000; Masson, 2001; Solinger, 2003: 20-32; Triseliotis, 2000). The demand from Western countries for Korean children increased concurrently with a growing shortage of working-class children available domestically. This was a result of the legalisation of abortion, increased availability of contraceptives, a growing societal tolerance for single mothers who became eligible for government welfare, but, above all, the general strengthening of women's rights after the sexual revolution of 1968 (Doreen Farrar, 1999; Solinger, 1992; Zelizer, 1985) was a major contributing force.

International adoption became almost synonymous with adoption from Korea, and was perceived as a bonding strategy to develop friendship ties between Korea and the host countries. In 1973, Holt's director Jack Theis stated: "Korean orphans adopted abroad have turned into some of the country's best goodwill ambassadors" (*Korea Newsreview*, 2/10/73). Two years later, the Swedish ambassador Bengt Odevall said in an interview:

The adoption program is one of the most successful undertakings between our two countries. Some 3,400 Korean orphans adopted by Swedish families from 1967 to 1974 have been well integrated into their adoptive families... I might say the relations between us can be likened to a blood-bonded one in consideration of the successful adoption program (*Korea Newsreview*, 10/18/75).

Canadian social worker Sydney Byma (1974) also warned that international adoption actually hindered the development of a domestic social welfare system in Korea, while International Social Service and Save the Children concluded that the existence of an efficient adoption policy in Korea encouraged parents to abandon their children in their belief of a better material life in a Western country, or, even more disturbingly, to use adoption as form of retroactive abortion (Kim Una, 2002; Lee Hye-Kyung, 1993; *Korea Newsreview*, 12/21/74). An even stronger response came from Dag Ahlander (1976), secretary at the Swedish embassy in Seoul as he informed his countrymen that international adoption must be considered a Western upper-class phenomenon and that it causes strongly negative reactions in the countries of origin. Ahlander referred to how Korean



media had portrayed the leading adopting country of Sweden in a negative way as the Swedes demanded more and more Korean children. Further, the Council of Europe (1980: 44-45) expressed concern over its usage in exchange for both economic aid and political support.

The first half of the 1970s also saw international adoption as playing a part in the struggle for legitimacy waged between the two Koreas. North Korea accused its southern neighbour of selling Korean offspring for profit to Westerners (Park Soon Ho, 1994: 52). The negative attention led to several panic-stricken temporary stops to Northern Europe and the promotion of domestic adoption, while the adoption program itself was transformed into something close to a state secret as its numbers were classified from 1974 and separated from emigration and diaspora statistics (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2002; Pyôn, Yi & Kim, 1999: 47).

The temporary stops mainly concerned the Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Norway and Denmark between 1970-75, partly motivated by a high preponderance of disrupted adoptions where adoptees were placed at institutions and foster homes and the discovery of cases of maltreatment of adopted Korean children in those countries, and partly by the open reporting of North Korea criticism in the left-leaning Scandinavian media (*Dagens Nyheter*, 1/7/71; *Korea Newsreview*, 2/8/75; *Korea Times* 12/15/74; *Seoul Shinmun*, 12/5/74). Nevertheless, business resumed after intense lobbying from the three Scandinavian countries. Particularly, Sweden played an important role in the campaign to abolish the temporary prohibitions by making use of its position in the U.N. Security Council. During the turbulent period, adoptive parents were encouraged to come to Korea and pick up their children to avoid negative publicity of escorted "mail order babies", and they were explicitly told to observe secrecy in the media concerning their adoption of Korean children.

In response to the North Korean accusations and to bolster the negative image of the country, a revision of the law, in 1976, renaming it the Special Adoption Law (*Ibyangt'ûgryêbôp*), made domestic adoption, foster care and sponsorship easier, and a plan for the gradual phasing out of international adoption by 1981 (with the exception from mixed and handicapped children) was announced (Breckenridge, 1977; Chun Byung Hoon, 1989; Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2002; Sarri, Baik & Bombyk, 1998; *Korea Herald*, 9/15/76; *Korea Times*, 7/18/86). At the same time, the number of receiving countries was restricted to eleven, and the agencies, limited to four, were required to be wholly run by Koreans: Social Welfare Society, Holt Children's Services, Korea Social Services and Eastern Child Welfare Society. The Five Year Plan for Adoption and Foster Care (1976-81) aimed at reducing the number of international adoptions by 1,000 annually and simultaneously increasing domestic adoptions by 500 through the introduction of a system of quotas. Regulated by the Social Welfare Society, the quota was based on the number of domestic adoptions placed the previous year (Kim Una, 2002; Yun Yông-su, 1993: 42-43).

In 1979, president Park Chung Hee was killed by one of his closest aides, and, as before, after a short democratisation period, a new military strongman, Chun Doo Hwan, came to power through a *coup d'état*. In 1980, the new government discontinued the 1976 policy when it was evident that the plan would not be fulfilled due to a failure in increasing domestic adoption. It outlined a new approach to international adoption, integrating adoption into the so-called non-governmental foreign policy (*mingan oegyo*) to expand the emigration program and develop friendship ties with Western allies (Sarri, Baik & Bombyk, 1998; *Korea Times*, 10/12/80). Through a process of government deregulation, the quota system was abolished, and the four agencies were allowed to compete with each other send unrestricted numbers of adoptable children abroad.

Consequently adoptions increased dramatically, resulting in the largest number ever to be sent abroad in one decade—66,511 international placements (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 1999). The 1980s were also the years showing the highest emigration movement from Korea to nearly the same Western countries affected by international adoption. The

agencies engaged themselves in profit-making activities, real estate investments, and were running their own delivery clinics, foster homes and temporary institutions. After a scandal broke out in 1984 around the international placements of missing children without the knowledge or consent of their biological parents, abandoned children were no longer eligible for adoption. Since then, a growing number of maternity homes for young, unwed mothers have been the main source for newborn and healthy babies (O, 1994; Yi Sôn-ok, 2001: 37). By the 1980s, Korea had achieved an acceptable level of economic wealth, and Park In Sun (1998: 229) has called those who were dispatched abroad as "goodwill ambassadors" in the decade of "the forgotten children," "victims in a pursuit of greater national economic prosperity." The years between 1984 and 1988 saw international adoption from Korea peaking with 6,500-9,000 cases a year, representing an amazing 1-1.4 percent of the country's annual living births (Kim Una, 2002).

Already from the beginning of the 1970s, the absolute majority of the children adopted overseas were by now full Korean and still mostly girls, although the proportion of boys was on the increase. The abandoned children who had constituted 55-65 percent of the total in the 1960s as well as those coming from broken families had, by the end of the decade, increasingly been replaced with the children of unmarried mothers from middle-class backgrounds. About half of the children were from these unwed women, with the remaining half still comprised of young factory workers (Spencer, 1988; Tahk, 1986a, 1986b). Furthermore, the ratio of disabled children was gradually growing, constituting one out of four adoptions. Among the receiving countries, it is no coincidence that those who had sided with the anti-Communist alliance in the war and continued to be important political allies and trade partners took in the most children; the United States, Norway and Sweden beginning in the 1950s, Denmark, Canada, France, Australia, Belgium and the Netherlands from the 1960s, and, finally, Luxembourg in 1984. In addition, since the 1960s, Korean children also went to West Germany, Italy and Switzerland and smaller numbers to England, New Zealand, Ireland, Spain and Finland.

### **New directions**

The events of June 1987—student demonstrations, labour strikes and massive popular protests—ended 26 years of military rule as president Chun was forced to step down and announce the opening of democratic elections (Cumings, 1997: 386-392; Lindström, 1993). Even though his right-hand man Roh Tae Woo was elected president in the following December election due to an unfortunate split in the opposition, Roh's government (1988-92) is commonly seen as the transitional stage to full democracy in Korea.

The 1988 Seoul Olympic Games showcased a proud and newly democratised and industrialised Korea to the world. Yet Western journalists started to write about the adoption program, and portrayed the host country as the leading global exporter of children. Criticism of international adoption had been heard before in Korea, but never had the negative attention been as strong and massive as in 1988. As a result, during the Olympics, sending Korean children abroad was temporarily suspended to avoid further negative attention, and the following year the number of international adoptions was reduced substantially.

In September of 1989, new guidelines for the improvement of the country's adoption policy and practice were issued with the purpose of reducing the annual numbers of children going abroad and to eventually stop adoptions by 1996, excepting mixed and disabled children. Adoption agencies were publicly criticised for having overcharged for both domestic and international adoptions and for having provided generous "delivery fees" to medical institutes in their quest for adoptable children (Sarri, Baik & Bombyk, 1998; Yun Yông-su, 1993: 44-45; *Korea Herald*, 9/9/89). Tax reductions were provided to encourage

domestic adoption, which was projected to grow by 400-600 placements a year, while overseas placements were restricted to relinquishment cases—in reality, children born by young, unwed mothers at the agencies' delivery clinics and maternity homes.

In August 1994, this second government plan to phase out international adoption was overturned on the grounds that the number of domestic adoptions remained too low, and, instead, an annual flexible decrease of 3-5 percent was set up with a more distant deadline of 2015 (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2002; Pyôn, Yi & Kim, 1999: 53-54). In 1995, the adoption law was changed to its present name, Special Law on Adoption Promotion and Procedure (*Ibyangch'okjin mit chólch'aê kwanhan t'ûgryêbôp*), and this law underwent two smaller revisions in 1999 and 2000 (Yun Hyê-mi, 1995). Between 1991 and 1997, the Korean government managed to keep the number of adoptions down to a little over 2,000 cases a year, but during the Asian economic "IMF crisis" of 1997-99, international adoption was allowed to increase again and placements of "IMF orphans" contributed to an increase to 2,400 children annually (Kim & Finch, 2002). At the same time, the government has encouraged domestic adoption, which, by the end of the 1990s, stood for one-third of all adoptions. Also, since the end of the economic crisis, the government has strived to create a long-term foster care system based on Western models as an alternative to adoption (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2002).

As a result of these efforts 22,925 children were adopted overseas during the 1990s, the absolute majority being extramarital. It is estimated that between 80-90 percent of all children in the country born out-of-wedlock end up for adoption compared to for example 1 percent in United States (Chandra, Abma, Maza & Bachrach, 1999; see Dong-A Ilbo 9/27/01). This is in spite of the fact that Korea, with 1 percent of women experiencing teenage motherhood, has the lowest rate of teenage pregnancy among all OECD countries, while United States with 22 percent is topping the list (United Nations Children's Fund, 2001). In addition, 4 percent of the Korean population is estimated to live below poverty line while the equivalent proportion for United States is 12.7 percent.

The relinquishing mothers are nowadays mostly teenagers or at least under the age of 25 years, often spending their pregnancies behind the secluded walls of the agencies' maternity homes, and the majority comes from a middle-class background where the stigma of pre-marital sexual activity or a former marriage has the potential to ruin future social advancement for both the parent and the child (Yi Sôn-ok, 2001: 70-73). The proportion of boys is slightly higher than girls, while as many as one out of three are categorised as disabled. Lastly, the receiving countries have been restricted to nine as of 2002: United States, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, Australia, Canada and the Netherlands.

Park In Sun (2002) points out that the current Korean situation is strongly reminiscent of the situation in Western countries before the change of mores that took place after the sexual revolution of the 1960s. She indicates that Korea will soon also have to look after its children, rather than blaming the consequences of war or the prioritisation of economic growth during Korea's rapid industrialization. These excuses are still sometimes used to hide behind, not to mention the self-Orientalizing image of Confucian thinking and bloodline clannishness. This culturalist explanation is, of course, as shallow as those used by Westerners to legitimise the adoption imperative for extramarital or divorced children, prior to the 1960s sexual revolution.

On the other hand, as the number of refugees from North Korea continues to increase, the adoption of North Korean children by South Koreans may, in a not too distant future, become a reality. Actually, ethnic Korean children from Manchuria have already started to arrive as adoptees, albeit in very small numbers (*Wolgan Chosun*, 1/7/02). In January of 2002 two orphaned North Korean children who, together with thousands of other parentless children, had crossed into Manchuria via the Tumen River border area in

search for food, were provided asylum in South Korea, and in the debate that followed the American missionary Tim Peters stated in an interview:

I think adoption is an excellent solution. You might remember that many orphaned South Korean children were adopted by Western families after the Korean War. It is time for South Koreans to do the same (*Korea Times*, 3/18/02).

After more than half a century, international adoption continues. International adoption is too often used to get rid of "impure" and costly children whether stigmatised by illegitimacy (*sasaenga*), by disability (*changae'a*) or by race (*honhyôla*). Mixed-race children have somewhat ironically returned as an adoption category, this time fathered by guest workers from South or Southeast Asia and consequently known as *Kosian* children. Not surprisingly, the United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has also repeatedly criticised Korea for not implementing measures to counter sexual, social or racial discrimination, while its Committee on the Rights of the Child expresses concern for the continuance of international adoption from a country that has the world's 12th largest economy (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003).

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