

The adopted Koreans - diaspora politics and the construction of an ethnic identity

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Introduction

This paper is a presentation of my own Ph.D. project and can be seen as a case study of the relationship between a diaspora and its homeland and the construction of an ethnic group, namely the overseas Koreans, the republic of Korea and the adopted Koreans. Using adoption, ethnicity and diaspora studies in a post-colonial and global setting, the purpose of the paper is to examine the history of Korean overseas adoption, the Western view of adopted Koreans and Korea's politics towards overseas Koreans. Finally the paper argues that the adopted Koreans are constructing their own ethnic identity in the third space between the overseas Koreans, the homeland and the host countries in the West as a part of a global Korean community which is in the process of developing, transgressing borders and cultures.

The adopted Koreans

The full history of overseas adoption in Korea and the adopted Koreans consisting of 150 000 children being sent away to more than 20 Western countries during a period of 50 years, is still sketchy as no one has yet written a full account. Instead, one is left with the option to utilize many different and disparate sources to be able to fit the pieces together. However, it is unquestionable that the story is fully intertwined with the division of Korea in 1948 and the war that followed.

The practice started off spontaneously during the Korean war when orphans were taken care of at military bases by U.N. soldiers. It was also during the years of war that the first Western style orphanages were set up, an absolute condition for the following mass migration of Korean children. In 1945 when Korea was liberated, there were just 38 child welfare institutions in the country inhabited by less than 3,000 children. In 1950, after the division and at the outbreak of the war, those numbers had increased to 215 institutions and almost 25,000 children. Finally, in post-war 1957, five years after the armistice, there were 482 institutions and close to 50,000 children living there.

In 1954, the Korean government set up Child Placement Service with the specific aim of getting rid of the thousands of bi-racial children, *hyonholin*, often abandoned by both their Western fathers and Korean mothers. In the same year, Harry Holt, driven by the obsession to rescue those bi-racial children, founded the adoption agency which still bears his name and which has developed not only to Korea's but the world's leading organisation in the field of international adoption placing more than 100,000 children and two thirds of the adoptions from Korea. During the 1950s almost 4,000 children, most of them bi-racial, left the country for adoption.

In 1961, a special law was passed which created the framework for a most effective adoption industry consisting of four licensed agencies, speedy procedures, a minimum of paper work and a secure guarantee for young and healthy babies. In the 1960s and 1970s when the mission to cleanse the country from bi-racial children was considered completed, overseas adoption found its new supply among the tens of thousands of Korean children declared foundlings in the brutal turmoil of urbanization and industrialization under the authoritarian regime of president Park Chung Hee. In total, 60,000 overseas adoptions were proceeded during those two decades. In the 1980s, during the tenure of president Chun Doo Hwan, overseas adoption continued in even larger numbers with 70,000 children consisting primarily of those born out of wedlock, and the middle of the decade saw overseas adoption peaking with almost 9,000 adoptions a year.

In 1988, the year of the summer Olympics in Seoul, Western journalists highlighted Korea's overseas adoption program as an outright trade in human beings, and the country became known in the world as *koasuch'ulguk* or number one in orphan exporting. Before 1988, overseas adoption had almost been treated as a state official secret, partly because of the accusation from North Korea that the southern neighbour was selling off its own children. After 1988, desperate attempts have been made either to stop overseas adoption or decrease the numbers annually in favour of domestic adoption and foster care, and as a result of these efforts 20,000 children were adopted overseas during the 1990s.

In spite of this, still every year around 2000 children leave the country for overseas adoption. With a population of 150,000 adopted Koreans, there are almost 100,000 adopted Koreans living in the U.S. consisting of half of all internationally adopted children and 15 percent of the total ethnic Korean population in that country, and almost 50,000 in Europe representing an estimated one third of both all internationally adopted children and ethnic Koreans on the continent.

Actually, no other country in the world has sent away so many children overseas in modern times. The closest comparisons in the history of forced child migration would be the 130,000 children who were sent away by the British Empire up until 1967 to populate the colonies, the 70,000 Finnish children who were brought temporarily to Sweden during World War II of whom 10,000 stayed as adoptees or foster children, and the 30,000 Aboriginal children in Australia who were forcefully separated from their parents and adopted to White couples as a civilizing project and today branded as cultural genocide.

An almost identical parallel to the Korean case is the more than 2,000 Irish children born by unmarried mothers whom the Catholic clergy sent away overseas for adoption for the same reasons as the Korean children, namely to protect the mores of the society. The difference from Korea is that Ireland stopped overseas adoption already in the middle of the 1970s, and the issue is discussed widely today as something of a national trauma forcing the Irish society to come to terms with its own sad history.

With all these historical parallels in mind, it is natural to wonder why Korea as an O.E.C.D. country is still sending away its children. Historically with the background of the Confucian thinking of *sadaejuu* or serving the great, to give human beings as a tribute to a dominating power could well be said to be a Korean tradition: virgins or *kongnyo* to the Ming emperor in the 14th century, “comfort women or *chongsindae* to the Japanese during the first half of the 20th century and adoptees or *ibyangin* to the Americans during the second half. Another way is to see overseas adoption as a symbol of Korea’s continuous dependency to the West, and especially the U.S. in spite of the end of the Cold war. In this way, overseas adoption reinforces the harsh realization of the country’s position as a powerless and dependent client state in the Western, American hegemonic world system, to borrow Immanuel Wallerstein’s words.

The Western perspective

Western studies on international adoption tend to focus indiscriminately on the psychosocial issues of an adoptees’ adjustment to the adopting family and assimilation to the host culture. This is especially evident in the leading adopting regions of North America, Scandinavia and Western Europe, where a significant number of researchers in the field are psychologists, psychiatrists or social scientists.

Since its beginning after World War II, international adoption has been the last resort to have a child for infertile middle-class couples, and is widely perceived by Western societies as a way of rescuing a non-White child from the miseries of the so-called Third world which includes Korea. This explains why few studies have examined the various consequences of international adoption for the sending countries, one of the most important aspects being the almost complete lack of a social welfare system for unmarried mothers and their children in for example Korea as a result of continuous international adoption.

Leading theorists in ethnicity and diaspora studies, such as Thomas Hylland Eriksen or Robert Cohen and William Safran, would not consider the adopted Koreans neither as an ethnic group nor a diaspora in a classical Western meaning. The group lacks everything from a common language to any serious attempts to endogamy, which Hylland Eriksen talks about while defining an ethnic group, and the existence of a myth of a homeland as both Cohen and Safran put great emphasize on.

Instead adopted Koreans are considered a part of their host countries with no relation at all to Korea or their Korean families. The result is that adopted Koreans are expected to be loyal to their adoptive parents and assimilate fully to their host cultures. Those who are showing an active interest in Korean culture or want to re-connect to their Korean family are accused of exposing nationalism and biologism, which is considered unacceptable for a typical Western left-liberal adoptive family.

Overseas Koreans and diaspora politics

Modern Korean emigration began in the 1860s when the Choson dynasty began to crumble as a result of intruding Western imperial powers. The first wave of emigrants

found their way to the Russian Far East territory, which borders present day North Korea. During the same decade, Koreans started to pour in to Chinese Manchuria in great numbers and in the 1870s and 1880s emigration to Japan and the U.S., respectively, began in earnest. These four countries, Russia, later Soviet Union and Central Asia, China, Japan and the U.S. have since that time been the main host countries for overseas Koreans.

The causes of mass emigration from Korea can be intimately linked to the country's semi-colonial status from the second half of the 19th century, while the main exodus took place during the colonial years: in 1945, 180,000 individuals lived in Soviet Central Asia after having been relocated in 1937, 2.2 million in China, 2 million in Japan and approximately 10,000 in the U.S. The emigration continued during the authoritarian regimes, especially to the U.S., creating a diaspora which today numbers 5 million people.

In 1995 president Kim Young Sam launched Korea's globalization drive, *segyehwa*. One way to achieve this is to reconnect with those 5 million overseas Koreans, who are officially defined as assets in the globalization drive. The end of the Cold war resulted in full access to 2 million *Chosonjok* in China and 500,000 *Koryo Saram* in the newly independent Central Asian states. The Chinese Koreans started to arrive in Korea as migrant workers, as brides filling the shortage of women created by sex-biased abortion, or even as adopted children, while the Korean minority in Central Asia played an important intermediary role for Korean investment in the region. The end of the authoritarian regimes also meant better relations with the 1 million *Chaemi Kyop'o* in the U.S. and the 700,000 *Zainichen* or *Chosenjin* in Japan.

In 1997, Overseas Korean Foundation was inaugurated as the central authority responsible for the overseas Koreans, *chaeye tongp'o*, in the quest for the country's globalization. The foundation's activities in creating a functioning network for the scattered Korean population in the world is an important part of this global community building and ethnic mobilization strategy whereby overseas and adopted Koreans are seen both as a tragic symbol of the nation's historical suffering after a century of brutal uprooting in the forms of colonialism, division, war, emigration and adoption, and as a guarantee for a bright future for a global Korean community seen as a huge extended and dispersed family, *isan kajok*.

The Korean way of globalization by embracing overseas Koreans whereby blood, *hyolt'ong*, as the lowest common denominator is beginning to constitute the collective sense of oneness including both South and North Koreans and overseas and adopted Koreans, has reached new heights during the current presidency of Kim Dae Jung. In 1998, during his first presidential year, Kim Dae Jung invited 29 leading adopted Koreans from eight different countries to a meeting in the Blue House where he, on behalf of the country, delivered a moving apology for sending away 150,000 Korean children. In 1999, a dual citizenship law came into effect, which includes adopted Koreans as well. President Kim has shown a remarkable interest in the adoption issue, *ibyangmunje*, as a part of his political agenda, while the number of newspaper articles dealing with the subject has increased dramatically during the 1990s.

The construction of an ethnic identity

Already in the middle of the 1980s, the first generation of adopted Koreans who had reached adulthood started to organize themselves, and today there are associations in almost every country affected by adoption from Korea. This organized adopted Korean community started to interact globally in the 1990s. In 1998 G.O.A.L., Global Overseas Adoptees' Link, was created by a group of adopted Koreans who had returned to Korea, and in 1999 the first international gathering of adopted Koreans was held in Washington D.C., the second two years later in Oslo, Norway, and a third being planned for Seoul, Korea, within a few years.

The movement of adopted Koreans is now trying to create an ethnic identity of its own in the third space between their birth country's dream of a global ethnic Korean community where the adopted Koreans are automatically perceived as Korean brethren, and a Western culture which demands complete assimilation and absolute loyalty and refuses to give space to anything else but rescue fantasies, colonial desires and orientalist performances. Such an ethnic identity would have to consider the fact that the organized adopted Korean community still only reaches out to a minority, while some countries do not even have an association. The only shared aspect agreed upon for the absolute majority of the adopted Koreans would be a common history of having been adopted from Korea. This third space, is defined by the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha as the space where culture has no unity, purity or fixity, and where primordial notions of race and nation has been replaced by a floating and hybrid existence. The postmodernist Arjun Appadurai has used the term *ethnoscape* to describe this transcultural condition: "...no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogenous".

It is precisely this aspect of diversity and hybridity in Korea's new and de-territorialized etnonationalism, linked to the process of reunification, to the Korean interpretation of the meaning of globalization, to anti-Western sentiments after the I.M.F. crisis, and to a growing and more realistic self-understanding of the country's postcolonial status, which Paik Nak-chung has pointed out when scrutinizing the utopian vision of a global ethnic community of 75 million Koreans. Professor Paik is well aware that this so-called homogenous community or *tanil minjok* has to be not only multinational, considering the majority of the overseas Koreans have changed their citizenship, and multiracial as many Koreans have intermarried with non-Koreans, but also multilingual, as Korean is no longer the mother-tongue of so many exiled countrymen.