

## **Confucian Family Values and Contemporary Adoption Practices in South Korea: Between Defiance and Continuity**

### 1. Introduction

On August 5th 2012, the new Special Adoption Law was implemented by the South Korean Ministry of Health and Social Welfare. This law culminates a series of previous initiatives that started around a decade ago, and that seek to promote domestic adoption in South Korea<sup>1</sup>, while trying to reduce the numbers of the international adoption cases. The promulgation of this legislation, and the novelties that it includes offer the perfect opportunity to reflect not only on the legal understanding of adoption, but also on the deeper cultural concepts and ideologies that surrounds family, kinship, and welfare practices in Korea. It is undeniable that family conceptions are visibly changing in this country as not only new realities such as childless couples or multi-cultural families are being included in the very category of family, but also the social stigma upon collectives such as single mothers is lessening. However, lingering family ideologies portrayed under the concept of “tradition” possess such strength, that changes and transformations collide in the everyday life of adoptive families. At the same time, other strategies employed by some to cope with the arising challenging situations are based precisely on the reproduction of said dominant ideologies. Thus, some parents find that the best way to face the prevailing social rejection of adoptive relationships is to emulate as much as possible the traditional ideal of blood-related kinship. The depth and complex nature of many of the realities that will be mentioned in the following pages would require much more analysis and space that what I can offer here. Thus, the main aim of the present paper will be to expose what I consider to be the historical relationship between Confucian family ideology and domestic adoption practices in the past, as well as in contemporary Korean society, to point out apparent contradictions that remain surreptitiously under widely sanctioned discourses and practices.

The main sources of information in which I have based my statements are diverse bibliographical sources, from historical analysis on the principles of Korean Confucianism to on-line newspaper articles. At the same time, many other considerations and reflections come from my fieldwork experience, started approximately a year ago. I am considering as such informal interviews with men and women related in some manner to adoption, casual conversations with numerous Koreans, assistance a several adoption-related events, and especially, the observations gathered while doing volunteer work in an adoption facility for five months.

### 2. Socio-historical background of Korean Confucianism

#### 2.1. Confucianism, tradition, and the making of family ideology

Since I started researching about domestic adoption in Korea, the need to turn to Confucianism in order to understand the multiple ways in which family is envisioned and enacted aroused quickly. In countless conversations and interviews, people from various ages, social statuses, origins and beliefs systematically relied on the so called “traditional Korean family” or “traditional culture” to explain to me why currently adoption is not fully accepted as a legitimate form of kinship. It became quite clear that only by approaching the meanings behind such category I would be able to start unraveling the logics of adoption. In that search, I consider two authors to be of particular eloquence and clearness in unveiling such issue, Martina Deuchler (1992) and Choi Jae Seok (2009). Both have studied intensely the historical development of Korea, particularly the periods of Koryo (918-1392) and Joseon (1392-1910), identifying both as crucial elements to disentangle the complexities of contemporary social

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<sup>1</sup> In the following, Korea.

issues. As these scholars affirm, what nowadays is portrayed popularly as traditional Korean values are a mixture of native beliefs and practices, together with a strong influence of the Confucian ideology. On the following, I will present what I consider to be the most relevant historical and theoretical points of Korean Confucianism in respect to said tradition in connection with family construction.

There is not a clear agreement on the precise moment when Chinese Confucianism was introduced to the Korean peninsula. Everything suggests that it occurred during the so called Period of the Warring States in China (403-221 B.C), but it was on the 4th century when this ideology started to spread and being openly accepted. During the period of the Three Kingdoms, Buddhism (the dominant religion at that time) and Confucianism coexisted harmoniously, as the areas of influence of each other were separated. While Buddhist ideas pointed out in a great extent to individualistic and otherworldly issues, Confucianism paid attention to more practical, state-related questions, which soon lead its presence to political domains (Jang-Tae, 2000). It took then a significant role in civil society, and in 958 –during Koryo Dynasty– civil service examination system was introduced as the main procedure to become a state employee. The contents of these exams were based in Confucian literature, mainly in the *Analects* and the *Book of Filial Piety*, which already shows the importance of family even in the political arena. Actually, the concept of “filial piety” (*hyo*) became quickly the core of this ideology, stipulating that love, respect, and honor to ancestors was the basis of human morality and the highest of the virtues (Park, 1995). Towards the end of Koryo and during the first half of Joseon Dynasty, Neo-Confucianism took a more orthodox approach, and a critical ideological and political position against Buddhism. Then, in search for a new theoretical and ethical corpus of knowledge that could provide solid legitimacy, a number of these Neo-Confucian, elite scholars –known as *yangban*– saw in this ideology the perfect means to establish a new social order in Korea. The crucial element in such intent came in the form of patrilineal, patriarchal ideology, which during the second half of Joseon became not only the basis for family life, but also and by extension, to politics, economy, and philosophical spheres (Deuchler, 1992; Choi, 2009). Actually, among all the countries where Confucianism was established (mainly China and Japan), Korea was the one that applied its teachings in the most orthodox way, bringing it to all corners of social life. In sum, and simplifying things a lot, Confucian elites sought after the configuration of a centralized state, as it was considered the most efficient way to control upper mobility and land distribution. The most convenient social entity in this regard was soon understood to be the family, conceived more closely to the idea of clan, of a unit strongly interdependent kin.

However, this picture must be mainly situated in the upper strata of society, as among commoners and slaves native customs were maintained for centuries. Actually, authors such as Deuchler and Peterson (1983) highlight the fact that Confucian scholars had to negotiate several practices due to the depth of those customs. Among its most relevant elements, there was the recognition of dual inheritance, meaning that both women and men could pass to their descendant lineage belonging. Even when Confucian patrilineal ideology was at its peak, as it will be presented later, among the ancestors that should be venerated overall the introduction of the maternal-grandfather was a particularity only to be found in Korea.

## 2.2. Korean Confucian lineage concept and its connection with adoption

Even though adoption had been practiced for centuries, its presence intensified as Confucianism got established in Korea. It came to be such a normalized mechanism, and was so well documented, that its importance is well known even today (Deuchler, 1992; Choi, 2009; Peterson, 1983). When interviewing or just conversing with different Koreans, one can easily see that most of them possess a clear knowledge on the fact that adoption was openly practiced in the past, as part of what they identify as their own Korean cultural heritage. However, while it looks like there is no shame in talking about the past, to bring up current adoption seems to be a very different story, and suddenly domestic adoption becomes a subject covered by a veil of secrecy. On the following pages, I will present what I consider to be the origins and evolution of

concepts that characterize Korean domestic adoption logics, such as this secrecy or public shame. Thus, in order to understand the current position of adoption among other family practices, as well as the tensions that adoptive parents, children and professionals face in their daily lives, some reflections should be done first regarding the historical relationship between Confucianism, family ideology, and past adoptive practices.

Confucianism depicts an otherworldly heaven as a sort of moral mirror in which humans should try to reflect their actions. Those actions, therefore, became situated in two different, but interconnected spheres, which were human relationships and rituality. In such scheme, again, family was conceived to be the basic unit to display both, and thus, it became the very core of society and the driving force behind all the other fields. So the elements that Confucianism introduced in this regard were the ancestor worship, funerary rites, new rules of succession and inheritance, new marriage principles, and the formation of descent groups or lineages as the basic social units. All this scheme was regulated by the concept of custom (*pungsok*), which at the same time became the main mechanism for the state to exercise its control over the population (Deuchler, 1992). This custom was expressed mainly by what was expressed by the concept of *samkangoryun*, the “three cardinal human relationships”, strengthened by the five “moral imperatives to guide human relationships”. Although its explanation will require a few lines, I consider that these principles still possess a considerable influence in Korean society today, providing sense to a considerable part of the logics behind family relationships. Thus, said cardinal principles are described as it follows: the king should be a model for his servants, the father for the son, and the husband for the wife. Regarding the ethics ruling human relationships, those are: respect between king and servants, a close bond between father and son, distinction between husband and wife, order between the old and the young, and trust among friends (Yang; Rosenblatt, 2001). The most relevant feature of this scheme is that it is based on a strict hierarchical order, in which age, gender, and status places the individual in a very precise social position. Particularly interesting here is the idea that women depended on men (their fathers, husbands and sons), that they were situated in an inferior place, that sons had primacy, and that the ruler always occupies the top of the system, which will explain later the current paradoxically paternalistic position of the state. All of these elements would persist for centuries, contributing to generate a certain gender and hierarchy ideology would become one of the main characteristics of Korean society.

Moreover, in particular the determination of kinship laces through blood-relationship would be a crucial element to understand Korean family ideology today. As I stated before, Joseon scholar elites took Confucian ideas to the most orthodox way, establishing the notion of Korean lineage social dominance. Through this mechanism, the consideration of kin got reduced to those related by blood, being descendants of the same common ancestors (*palcho*). Secondly, lineages were organized strictly by patrilineal logics, which went together with the establishment of the primogeniture right. Theoretically, only male could pass inheritance rights to their first-born son, which included not only properties (land, slaves, etc.), but also the privilege of performing the ancestral rites, an act considered to be the highest sign of filial piety. Thirdly, patrilocality ruled as well, stipulating that once they got married, women should move to the house of her husband, stop being part of their birth families and be inscribed on his family register, called *chopko* (Deuchler, 1992). In the fourth place, the concept of filial piety became central, based on the idea that the devotion that a son feels for his parents derived from their function as “Heaven and Earth”. Thus, it was stipulated that children were eternally indebted to their parents, due to the fact that they had given birth to them (Lee, 1997). Finally, Confucianism stipulated as well that the only legitimate way to provide offspring was through heterosexual marriage. For centuries, this scheme was put into practice, being negotiated at the same time with some more inclusive and equalitarian native kinship forms, but taking quite a leading position in most cases. In sum, three elements that came along with Confucianism would form the ideological and practical base for adoption: the central positioning of family in respect of all aspects of social life, the importance of lineage and blood ties, and the male-centered conception of power relationships and authority within the kinship groups.

Embedded in those ideals, as lineages became more prominent adoption started to be practiced in a bigger scale throughout Joseon. Actually, in their reflections about the confucianization of Korean society Deuchler and Peterson highlight an interesting fact. They state that before the second half of Joseon Dynasty, women, men, and fellow siblings shared the same inheritance rights, so there was usually little need to turn to adoption in order to find continuity and prosperity for the family. However, due to the necessity of having a male to occupy the role of the family head, the main purpose of adoption became related almost exclusively to procure an heir to said lineage. Secondly, under Confucian principles girls were adopted as well, but they were required as workforce in the house chores, the crops, etc. In both cases, prospective adoptive kin was always searched inside the lineage members, so that even though there could be a separation of several generations, the principle of blood continuity was not defied. Clearly, adoption, as many other practices surrounding family such as marriage (Kendall, 1996), was carried out for specific, practical purposes. As family was the base for all other social scenarios, a failure in securing a male heir could entail the ruin of the lineage in economic, political, and social terms. One noteworthy consequence of these family-solidarity relationships was the fact that adoption disruption got to be a common phenomenon as well, apparently without entailing major complications. As adoption was negotiated among family members following mainly strategic purposes, in numerous cases the parents of adoptees were both alive when the adoption had taken place. However, if the birthfather of the adoptee got severely sick or died, adoption could be terminated in order to let the son occupy the role of heir for his own household (Peterson, 1983). The last element to bear in mind regarding adoption practices during was its open character. As adoption was practiced among relatives who shared the same blood, there was no need of hiding it or to feel too much shame about it. Thus, the inscription in the family register of those new members under the term “adopted” was done naturally, without entailing any secrecy, contrary to modern times as we will see.

### 2.3. Changes after the Korean War

In the development of domestic adoption, I consider that the Korean War (1950-1953) should be considered as another historical milestone. Since the end of the conflict, and due to the elevated number of war orphans, deprived children, and the devastation left behind, Korea started a new path of social welfare policies throughout the establishment of international adoption treaties with several American and European countries. A lot has been said regarding the exodus of over 200,000 children, but for the purpose of this paper, the most interesting aspect of this phenomenon is that it drew attention to Korean adoption internationally and contributed in different ways to the transformation of family schemes. Furthermore, it was then when adoption agencies and children facilities emerged in considerable numbers, positioning themselves as key actors in the flows of both national and international adoption. At the same time, the decades that followed the conflict witnessed crucial social changes such as a massive urban exodus, the rapid economic development, the fierce crisis of 1997, and the opening of the country to economic and cultural influences from abroad (Eun, 2000). Along with the new ways of life generated under such scenarios, the crucial past importance of lineages started to descend. Tendencies such as the nuclearization of the family, whose origins should be situated as a matter of fact in Joseon, became more acute (Chang, 1997). Additionally, household organization started to become more dependent on couples, and not on ascending family lines.

### 3. Domestic adoption today: Tensions, challenges and continuities

Even though lineage organization has lost much of its social preeminence, some of the moral principles behind its legitimacy still remain, being reproduced in daily life in many different ways. Having in mind the historical scheme that surrounds adoption, now it is time to focus on how it all affects adoption today. My main argument in this regard is that the complex development of family ideologies in Korea has generated moral and practical tensions that range from the full acceptance of new ways of doing family based on non-blood related kinship, to the determination to continue reproducing Confucian notions of family in a more or less orthodox

manner. In the following lines I will present what I consider to be the most interesting aspects of these phenomena, which are

### 3.1. Secret adoption VS Open adoption

After the promulgation of different laws regarding the management of domestic adoption processes, on the fifth of August 2012 the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare promulgated what seems to be one of the most ambitious legislation in this matter so far, the Special Adoption Law<sup>2</sup>. Later on I will explain more of the novelties that it contains, but to begin with, I will focus on the most significant one, which is the mandatory requisite of doing open adoptions. In this case, this term means that now all prospective parents have to go to Family Court to formalize the adoption by registering all the pertinent data of the child and the parents, an element that have provoked a lot of controversy (Heit, 2013). This measure possess mainly two purposes, summarized as it follows. First, to ensure the suitability of the prospective parents, and second, to guarantee the rights that children possess to access to their own records. In order to understand the reasons behind the polemic aroused by such situation, I will start by going back again to the Joseon adoption culture. As I stated, during said dynasty adoption got to be naturalized since, being performed primarily inside the lineage members, it presented no challenge towards the value of blood-continuity. However, the acute decrease of lineage ideology has put an end of the synonymy between “adoption” and “blood ties”. In other words, prospective parents must look for children outside the family, and thus, the blood line becomes obviously discontinued. At the same time, and even though things are changing significantly, the very fact of recurring to adoption as a way to have descendants is directly related to infertility by many citizens. Presenting it roughly, both to take a stranger as one’s offspring, and to appear as an infertile adult are elements that can bring not only shame, but can create also many professional and personal barriers (Yang; Rosenblatt, 2008.). Again, this is a good example of the scope that Confucian theories about the importance and ubiquity of family matters have reached. In order to avoid social criticism and its further consequences, for decades many couples have carried out what is known as “secret adoptions”. This expression entails different meanings, going from just maintain adoption as a secret to other family members or acquaintances, to even not telling it to adoptees themselves, or even to the authorities. Strategies to maintain the secrecy are indeed multifold. Some parents have moved to a different neighborhood, or even to an entirely different place. Other mothers have even resorted to fake a pregnancy, or have remain almost hidden inside their homes for months. Nevertheless, as it happens with adoption practices in many places, these “tricks” are in fact *vox populi*, and in conversations with fellow researchers, adoption facility workers, and single mothers, many have let me know about a stratagem that could be defined in fact as a well-kwon secret. Actually, these practices are not exclusive to Korea or come solely as a consequence of Confucian ideologies. In Spain, for example, very similar –if not identical–procedures were performed in the same way, for very similar purposes, and again, most of the people surrounding each case came to know in the end. However, the most significant difference is that those practices ceased decades ago, while in Korea there are those who state that even nowadays–or at least until very recently–were still performed.

Another relevant perspective is what secrecy entails in legal terms. To avoid going public with the adoption, some people has gone as far as to made either illegally, avoiding any kind of registration, or legally, but without leaving personal records that can identify those people as adopters. Especially in the second case, again a sort of customary system have been working in Korea for decades, so irregularities in such adoption processes can be analyzed as a product of established negotiations in pursuit of confidentiality between prospective parents and adoption agencies. However, criticism against the system of secret adoptions has gathered together several civil groups, from international adoptees, to single mothers. After years of activism and different kinds of protests and intents to raise public awareness towards those irregularities,

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<sup>2</sup> In Korean, 입양특례법.

some of the petitions of these groups have been actually replied through the establishment of the cited Law (Heit, 2013).

From another point of view, the fact that now prospective parents have to agree to make adoption open does not entail that all of them embrace this new idea of adoption unreservedly. In this respect, I find particularly interesting the persistent importance of blood-tied kinship. Many parents employ different tactics either to simulate its existence, or to conceal as much as possible the adoption. While doing my fieldwork, as well as when talking with some professionals in adoption facilities, many acknowledge the fact that quite a few parents start the process by looking for a baby who matches their blood-types. That way, in the future blood tests, or any visit to the doctor can suppose less stress for those worried about the revealing of the adoptive nature of the parent-child relationship. Similarly, many others try to find children who resemble them physically. While the first strategy can be more common in Korea, actually the search for sons or daughters that could easily pass as a birth child by their looks can be found in many other countries where domestic adoption is practiced in this way. The most interesting aspect of both practices in Korea is that, while these adults are defying the “real” blood connection by resorting to adoption, at the same time they keep on reproducing the Confucian notion of the importance of the blood between parents and offspring. Still lacking a lot of research to do about it, I cannot but wonder until what extent these attitudes respond to a personal will, pressure from the social environment, or even as a kind of conscious objection to the lack of commonalities between family members.

Finally, it is also true that many other parents agree openly to the new legislation on adoption, or at least regarding the openness of the process. As Hayes and Kim (2007) show in their article, and as I have been able to witness during my fieldwork sessions, is that social awareness towards the necessity of being honest with the adoptees about their identity and their origins. When to say it, how to, or who to are indeed challenging questions, but it seems that many mothers and fathers are becoming less hesitant about it.

### 3.2. A child-centered society?

One fundamental element in which I consider that still exist many forms of thought similar to – and at the same time contrary to – Confucian precepts is the respective position in which children and parents are socially situated. Even though the principle of filial piety appears as the most relevant one in some studies of Confucianism, I argue that somehow it could be described as “child-centered” as well. Actually, when I first arrived to Korea I was surprised in endless observations, when watching adults cede their seats to little children in the subway or the bus, or parents feeding their not-so-little children in public places. One particularity of Korean society in this regard is the extended custom of designating the parents by the name of their son or daughter, a phenomenon called teknonymy (Lee, 1997). A deep analysis on the complexity of those behaviors exceeds the scope of this paper, but I consider those vignettes to be somehow representative of a tendency in which children are treated publicly kindly, almost near the spoiling. However, in the case of adoption, the focus seems to be much more oriented to the side of parents. Recalling what it was stated before about the historical practices during Joseon, it looks evident that the main goal of adoption then was to provide some services to a group of adults. That is, in the case of males, they were required to portray the role of heir and its correlated duties. Regarding women, usually they were expected to work on the housework, or in other types of household labor. Decades ago, the same parental-centric perspective on adoptive practices was not only uncontested but, along with the secrecy-oriented turn, adoption disappeared considerably from the public discourse.

However, the promulgation of the “Hague Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect Intercountry Adoption” established an inflection point in the theoretical conception of adoption worldwide. For the first time, it was stipulated that adoption must be understood as a child-protection measure, in which the best interest of the child has to be considered as a priority. Furthermore, it expresses that states have to do their best to try, in the first place, that the child stays with his or her birth family. If not possible, the next

best option considered is to place the child for domestic adoption, and just as a final resort, to send him or her for international adoption (Jeong Trenka, 2013). Later on, I will analyze the aspect of the placement in more depth, as I consider it to be another issue where latent Confucian values collide with the direction of changes. But back to the Convention, even though the convention focuses on intercountry adoption, it has indeed affected domestic processes in many places, including Korea. Actually, on May 2013 the Korean Minister of Health and Welfare finally signed it, but previously, it had definitely served as a big impulse to the promulgation of the Adoption Special Law. As it has been said in the previous chapters, the intention of the implementation of both legislations is to reduce the numbers of international adoption, and to promote the domestic one at the same time that the process offers more safety guarantees and less irregularities. In order to procure such things, and the first step has been the obligation to go to Family Court and register all family data. The legal procedures themselves have become more complex and meticulous, because following the spirit of the law –or at least what it stipulates in theory- now the priority is to assure that the minor ends up being with the best possible family. However, in practical terms, this is translated in a longer, harder, and more expensive procedure for both prospective parents and adoption agencies. As with the obligation of openness, one of my future research subjects will be precisely to analyze the impact of this new waiting period in the intentions and plans of the prospective parents, and how agencies are managing to deal with those new pressures.

“The best interest of the child”, has become a sort of motto that accompanies almost every event or publication regarding adoption nowadays. Nevertheless, I consider that in reality, this norm is obviated rather frequently by giving more importance to the will and demands of the parents than to the needs of the children. Again, and even though this happens in many different countries, Korea can be a significant example of this phenomenon, considering what I stated before about maintaining a façade of blood-related kinship as a way to evade criticism. The initial element to take account of could be the social perception of the necessity of having descendants. Again, this belief is not only stipulated by Confucianism, but the still deep influence that this ideology has makes it worth the analysis in this point. According to its precepts, the obligation of men is to provide an heir capable of continuing the lineage, whereas in the case of women motherhood is seeing as her realization as human beings. Not being able to accomplish that can be interpreted as a major failure in life, and moreover, a conscious rejection of having children is seen by many as a selfish, disrespectful, and reprehensible attitude (Yang; Rosenblatt, 2008). That is why I maintain that among adoptive parents, there are those whose main motivation is to have a child to avoid the social stigma attached to childless adults, and not to fulfill the children rights that stipulate that he or she should grow up in a proper family, be given the necessary means to accede to education or health services, etc. On the other hand, motivations for rejecting a child presented as a candidate for adoption provoke as well interesting reflections. For example, some prospective parents reject healthy, “normal” babies, for having small “imperfections”, such as some red spots on their faces, or too small heads –thought as a possible indication of mental disability– for not being responsive enough, not “pretty”, etc. Again, the question about if this is not a way to prioritize the interests of the parents arises. It is undeniable that parents should have a saying about the child whom they are going to share their future with, but I wonder what role social prejudice against some physical features is playing, or how accurate is to depict parents as “picky” regarding the selection of the children. Clearly, the logics behind these phenomena requires a deeper research. Besides, and undoubtedly, establishing which ones are “right” reasons to motivate the desire of having a child is a hard thing to determine. The circumstances surrounding every family and individual can be tremendously diverse, even though they are immersed on a prevalent Confucian mindset, as I maintain here. However, sometimes it seems that identify those which are dangerously near to the category of “questionable” or plainly “wrong” can be easier to do.

Another relevant aspect is the relationship between Confucian and the implementation of conception of adoption as a child protection measure relies on the gender construction and its consequences over the different adoption rates of boys and girls. Until some decades ago, boys were preferred for adoption, as having a male heir was considered a necessity. Currently though,

statistics show a very different tendency. In 2013, 203 boys were adopted, while the number of girls raised up until 483 (Ministry of Health and Social Welfare statistics). Most authors point out directly to the decrease of the lineage ideology as the major reason behind this change, whereas others consider that preference for girls goes together with the idea that they are easier to manage and less problematic than boys (Eun, 2011). While I consider both to be accurate, I would add a third factor. Korea faces grave phenomenon of population ageing, which together with low birth rate levels and scarce social welfare policies, makes elderly care a serious preoccupation for many people. In that context, daughters are seen by many as the best option to face such complicated situation, as traditionally they have been depicted as devoted daughters and good caregivers, a tendency that adoption numbers reflect as well. In sum, the lingering, “traditional”, portrayal of boys as rebellious, and girls as docile and caring are partially legacies of the Confucian construction of gender stereotypes.

Finally, the domestic adoption rates of children with disabilities presents contradictions with the discourse on the centrality of children in Korean culture as well. Since the end of the Korean War, the vast majority of this kind of children have been derived to international adoption. As an example, in 2012, from a total of 1,125 children adopted, just 52 had disabilities (Ministry of Health and Social Welfare). In this case, there are primarily two elements which can explain –at least partially- this phenomenon. First, even though social awareness in this regard is growing, in general there is a sever taboo about people with disabilities in Korea, as well as in other countries of East Asia. Secondarily, and going back to what it was stated before, many prospective parents not only want their children to resemble them, but also to be as “perfect” as possible. This paper do not seek to demonize parents, and it is quite clear that adoption is not an easy process. However, what it appears as questionable is the discourse on the “best interest of the child” when put into practice.

### 3.3. Origins and placement of the children: Single-motherhood and matrimony

In this point, I will reflect on the origin of the children given up for adoption, one of the most unique characteristics of Korean adoption system, and which proves particularly well how resilient Confucian family ideologies are today. That is, more than ninety percent of Korean adoptees come from single mothers. When we compare these numbers with the media of Europe, which is five percent, the difference is more than visible. As I presented, one of the characteristics of Confucian thought is the conception of heterosexual matrimony as the only legitimate institution in which offspring must be conceived. By defying such principle, these women go against what is portrayed as “traditional values”, and thus are criticized as unworthy, reckless, or even as irrational. Once they get pregnant, many are forced by their own families, or by different significant actors in other social or professional spheres, to relinquish their babies and give them up for adoption. It has been hard for me to find specific data regarding the socio-demographic characteristics of these women so far, but the general discourse portrays them primarily as teenagers, overwhelmed by such situation. However, I consider that many women beyond their twenties and thirties are part of this collective as well, mainly due to a series of difficulties faced by them in the professional sphere, a subject that will be discussed in the next section.

From a different perspective, a potential paradox can occur if the Special Adoption Law is implemented properly. In accordance with the international standards stipulated by the Hague Convention, and guided by the purpose of increasing the rates of domestic adoption, the spectrum of potential parents has been widened. As a result, currently single women and men are now allowed to apply for adoption. This fact is particularly noteworthy because it clearly confronts the domination of marriage in adoption suitability standards. However, the apparent contradiction grows when the economic aid provided by the government is considered. While single mothers who decide to raise their children receive around 70,000 won a month from the government<sup>3</sup>, for single adoptive parents (as well as for couples) the number doubles this said

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<sup>3</sup> Around 55 euros, or 63 US dollars.

amount (Jung Johansson, 2014). One of the possible interpretations that this situation entails is, again, the surreptitious message that adoption is more valuable than single birth parenthood. Again, I am still at the very beginning of my research and many aspects are still to be deeply studied, however in these matters, I consider that the ideological constructions behind both collectives are as the following. Birth single mothers, somehow, become “tainted” by the idea of having had sex outside the matrimony, while adoptive parents can be indeed praised by their generous intentions. This last conception seems to go in a very different direction compared to what I stated before about the image of adoptive parents as infertile. However, in different informal conversation people with connections to adoption, as well as others who do not have them at all, have transmitted me as well this other idea of adoptive parents seen as good people who help children in need. But yet again, this attitudes seem to be apparently contradictory with the traditional value of blood, as in this situation, non-blood kin relationships are receiving more recognition than direct blood descent-based ties. These elements connect at the same time with the crucial question of what can be understood as “family”, what social phenomena are included in such category, and which ones are judged as unacceptable. In these respect, numerous single mothers associations –some of them in collaboration with adoptees groups– are trying to situate single motherhood as a legit form of family. The fact that ideologies about such matters are constantly evolving in Korea is a fact, and gradually more realities are being embraced as valid practices. However, when looking at governmental initiatives such as those economic aid provisions, it is clear that Confucian values are still playing a substantive role in that society (Yang, 2002).

Finally, one additional consideration must be done regarding the presence of the fathers in the discourses surrounding the adoption phenomena. As I stated, the image of a married couple with children is omnipresent when talking about family in Korea. However, it is curious to realize that beyond those pictures, men are almost nowhere to be found regarding the discourses and on birth parents. So far, I have attended many different events about adoption and single mothers, but the discourses are almost unanimously focused on birth-mothers. At the same time, articles and publications about adoption fail to mention them as well, and from the perspective of adoption agencies and governmental assistance, again only birth-mothers are visibly included. This can respond to a double discourse, based again on long-lasting gender stereotypes related in a great extent to Confucian ideologies. To put it shortly, women are considered the responsible ones for family affairs, and while they are presumed to be intrinsically attached to said sphere, men are understood to be focused in other matters, usually more related to professional spheres. Thus, although the absence of parents can be somehow morally questionable, it is a less reproachable behavior that has lesser social consequences indeed. This is not a situation that can be found solely in Korea, but the Confucian patrilineal and patriarchal system presumes for men a stronger centrality in the family scheme than in other societies. That is why the large absence of men in adoption discourses can be, to say the least, interesting. On the other hand, and this is product of a more personal reflection yet to be confirmed, I cannot but consider if the situation cannot be analyzed the other way around as well. That is, as in practical terms men are considered to be not so attached to children, and that single fatherhood is thus a phenomenon to be avoided, I wonder if, in fact, any men are applying –or even considering to apply–for domestic adoption. And if they do, would they be preferred in respect of single women applicants? Would it be the opposite? Or actually equality would prevail? Furthermore, it would be truly interesting to see how adoption agencies and the Family Court would respond to such situation.

### 3.4. The metaphor on state and family

The last sphere that will be analyzed here, and in which current adoption practices and Confucian family ideology bump into each other once again, is connected with the very relationship between the Korean state and its citizens. Turning again to the golden age of Korean Confucianism, Joseon elites and governors reproduced intensively the idea that in order to maintain social peace and harmony, those in possession of knowledge and virtue should serve as moral guidance. Among those virtuous men, the king was conceived to be the highest

example, displaying a sort of fatherly role towards his citizens. And thus, a powerful metaphor was established, in which the people in charge of political and influential duties was given the obligation, as loving parents and leaders, to take care if their children –the citizens– not only in material matters, but also, in moral and ethical ones (Lee, 2000). Although slightly transformed, this metaphor survived for centuries, becoming particularly strong in the following decades to the Korean War. In order to rebuild the country and situated it in the path of industrialization and economic development, the idea of Koreans seeing as a big, united family, governed by a caring and providing father (the government) started to permeate the public discourse. Again, the ubiquity of family stipulated by Confucianism was clearly embraced by public discourses. Still, when put into practice, things seem to be quite dissimilar. As it happens with other East Asian countries, Korea is known for the lack of public welfare, and here I find another possible contradiction. Because when it comes to family issues, the metaphor of the common family dissolves, and it is presumed that each household must take care of its problems and difficulties on its own. In this particular scenario, the contraposition of public-private social spheres seems to be prioritized before the narrative on the “big Korean family”. When this logic reaches childcare, one more time paradoxical realities arise. As it was presented before, some scholars interpret Korean Confucian ideologies as child-centered, however, little support is received by families in general.

One particularly interesting component of this scheme is the dominant Korean corporative culture. Many companies –especially the influential *chaebol*– employ said metaphor as a strategy to obtain loyalty and efficiency from the employees (Janelli, 1993). Furthermore, many companies promote the idea that, united as a family and working hard together, the outcome of their efforts will revert to the progress of the country, that is, the biggest family of all. However, there is a critical difference between the embrace of Confucian ideas by corporate culture, and the one done by Joseon elites. Confucian classics established that the ruler must possess power to rule, but that does not imply infallibility or denies the possibility of protest when he is not performing well. Contrary to this, Korean corporative hierarchical division of power comes along with the notion that no inferior should question a superior (cita). In such context, where said corporative culture, together with fierce competitiveness and gender discrimination, instead of being promoted, the creation of “real” families seem to be discouraged. Pregnancy and maternity –to some the fullest of womanhood as I said previously– are not always fully covered by their correspondent leaves, and even sometimes, they are accompanied by dismiss. On the other hand, even though male also leaves for father exist, negative stereotypes towards men prevent the most of them from applying.

Finally, education seems to be another element to consider regarding the intersections between Confucian ideology-based social practices and domestic adoption realities. One of the most appraised virtues of Confucianism has been the emphasis it puts on education and the value of learning as a form of self-improvement, and ultimately, as a means for maintaining social harmony (Khil, 2004). Accordingly, one of the characteristics of Korea, established during Joseon Dynasty throughout the Confucian system, is the importance of the educational career. Back then, civil examinations were the soundest way to provide means for upper mobility, not only for oneself, but by extension, for the whole lineage. Currently, year after year Korea appears in the statistics as one of the leading countries in terms of educational achievements. Children and parents make vast sacrifices to obtain good grades, and society in general appraise positively those attitudes. However, the academic field seems to be one of the main sources of family tension, as in general parents have high expectations from their offspring. Authors who have analyzed international adoption phenomena have shown clearly that school and after-school activities present particular difficulties to many adoptees. In some cases, the ages of the children do not have a direct correspondence with their expected academic levels, the assimilation of adoptees to the collective of immigrants can cause some difficulties, and some have to face racial discrimination as well (De la Fuente, 2008). For obvious reasons, in the case of Korean domestic adoptees racial issues are not problematic, but I consider that they can face some other similar academic challenges. As they reach puberty, identity issues arise, which in the case of adoptees who know themselves as such can be particularly sensitive. When this

situation is put together with the pressures of education, frustration appears (Chang, 2011). One crucial point here is that education and grades are seen, primarily, as one of the most efficient ways to achieve upper social mobility. With such a strong culture of competitiveness, together with a growing rate of young unemployment, to be left behind in this scenario entails more obstacles to gain a decent position in the future. And as tension grows, some parents start even questioning the adoption itself, and if they made the right decision.

#### 4. Conclusions

Social mindsets are changing steadily in Korea, and more inclusive and diverse realities are being accepted as family. As one of such alternatives, adoption is starting to be separated from negative concepts such as shame—applicable in this case both to domestic and international phenomena—and seeing as a legitimate form of constructing a family. However, still some more or less surreptitious attitudes bounded to a certain idea of “tradition” present difficulties in such path. Behind those lies a complexity of socio-historical influences, among which Confucian ideology stands out as the most remarkable and identifiable one. Thus, the principle of the centrality of lineage in all spheres of human life comes together with key elements as the blood-ties primacy, heterosexual marriage as the solely legitimate productive unit, a sort of parental-centered family life, or the metaphor between state as father, and citizens as children. However, contradictions come hand in hand along with this well-established images, mostly as a social response or as a form of adaptation that individuals carry out in order to face difficulties in the most efficient way. That is why some parents who turn to adoption pretend that they are bounded by blood to their children, or why even though said blood is so important as a means of belonging to a bigger, more prestigious entity as lineage can be, when this relationship entails single motherhood blood turns pale in comparison with sacred matrimony.

Undoubtedly, very important steps are taken in the direction of recognizing the rights of adoptees and assuring the legal process, as the signature of the Special Adoption Law and The Hague Convention on Adoption proves. And together with that, it looks like more works are published in this regard. Still, a lot has to be researched and analyzed about domestic adoption logics, how the actors immersed in them conceive its different elements or what are their difficulties, their potentialities, and their positive initiatives. Now it seems to be the perfect moment for the Academia to contribute to disentangle these, and many more, dynamics, and provide some ideas for those who day by day have to struggle for being legitimized in the category of “family”.

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