

WORKING PAPER SERIES

Mapping Multiple Histories of Korean American Transnational Adoption

JANUARY 2009

WP 09-01

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Note: This paper was based on a lecture by the author titled “Mapping Multiple Histories of Korean Adoption” but was prepared exclusively for the U.S.-Korea Institute’s Working Paper Series.

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HISTORIES OF KOREAN AMERICAN TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION

The practice of Korean transnational adoption has a history of more than fifty years that includes multiple overlapping layers. One history is specific to the aftermath of the Korean War and subsequent U.S.-South Korean geopolitical relations. Another is the history of racialization of Korean adoptees as Asian Americans, and as a part of an ongoing history of American transracial adoption. Yet another is the history of U.S. immigration policy which, for Korean adoptees, has swung to extremes. And finally, there is also the history of Korean adoptee communities themselves. All these rich histories that directly or indirectly affect Korean adoption and the sociopolitical history of changing attitudes about transracial and transnational adoption have particular significance in telling the story of Korean adoption in America. These histories include the policies, laws, social, cultural, and political events that have made transnational adoption more and more commonplace since the first Korean transnational adoption in the 1950s. This paper will address these multiple, interwoven histories of Korean American adoption.

GEOPOLITICAL HISTORIES: ADOPTION AND THE AFTERMATH OF THE KOREAN WAR

The first generation of Korean adoptees consisted mainly of war orphans sent to the United States in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War, and constitutes only a tiny fraction of the current overall population of Korean adoptees (less than four percent of the current Korean American adoptee population was adopted before 1962).¹ Despite their small numbers, these adoptees have become iconic in Americans' understandings of Korean adoption and the transracial adoptee experience. The broadly understood narrative of a child orphaned by war and rescued through adoption into a benevolent American family has its roots in this generation. The cultural role of the Korean American adoptee was largely established during the 1950s and 1960s as a result of media attention given to this small group of Korean immigrants who arrived in the United States when almost all other Asian nationals were barred from legal American immigration by a strict policy of Asian exclusion that had been in effect in some form since 1882.² So, even the trope of the Korean adoptee as "exceptional" (in terms of cultural assimilation, psychological adjustment, and social accomplishments) among American peoples of color and among immigrants began with this small group of adoptees—who are now the elders of Korean adoptee communities in the United States and throughout the world.

In examining this first generation of Korean American adoptees, it is essential to consider the effects of the Korean War on Korean society and on U.S.-Korean relations. The transnational adoption program that began between the United States and South Korea in 1953 was a direct response to the consequences of American actions in Korea, including the deployment of troops to the Korean peninsula and the limited occupation of South Korea by American troops that has continued to present day. War orphans, the first adoptees, were configured as "refugees" from war and as unfortunates who carried the stigma of mixed-race parentage (many were the offspring of Korean mothers and American G.I. fathers), a socially unacceptable situation in Korea in the post-war period (or even today). Like the war itself, the practice of transnational adoption was in large part a product of American intervention; it was (and in many cases, still is) widely believed that it would be far better for these children to be placed in the United States than to remain in Korea, a nation that was imagined as war-torn, culturally backwards, and impoverished in the American consciousness.

Ramsay Liem characterizes the Korean War as the "first 'hot' war of the Cold War...[the United States'] first encounter on the Asian mainland; it was also the first failure to achieve victory [for the U.S]."³ In many ways, since the Korean War was the first shooting war of the Cold War, it also represented the first test of America's political and ideological will against communism in Asia, which had particular strategic interest for America, as co-habitants of the Soviet hemisphere. He also

¹ From demographic sources compiled by Tobias Hübinette: 1948-78, from Weil, Richard H. "International Adoption: The Quiet Migration." *International Migration Review* 18.2 (1984): 276-293.

² The Chinese Exclusion Act passed May 6, 1882, was the first piece of anti-immigration legislation passed in the United States, and the only one in American history which excluded a specified nationality.

³ Liem, Ramsay. "History, Trauma, and Identity: The Legacy of the Korean War for Korean Americans." *Amerasian Journal* 29 (2003/4): 114.

notes that the war separated (and continues to separate) as many as 10 million Koreans across the DMZ.⁴ Liem attempts to link the partition of Korea to emigration from the northern part of Korea⁵ through oral histories of Korean Americans in the United States and finds that the trauma of civil war for Korean Americans is very much a part of the memories of first and second generation Korean American immigrants.⁶ However, the Korean War also served as the germinal event that has led to the permanent separation of tens of thousands of Korean children from their biological parents through adoption abroad, a reality that has received far less attention from studies of the Korean diaspora.⁷

Though the existence of some of the first Korean adoptees, biracial children of American paternity, was a direct result of the presence of the American military in Korea, transnational adoption out of Korea to the United States was sustained by the popularity of the practice among the American public, whether motivated by sympathy, a sense of obligation, national pride, or convenience. Policies governing the relationship between the U.S. and South Korea have been hotly debated in both nations (though probably more so in Korea), while both the occupation of South Korea by American military personnel and the emigration of Korean children for transnational adoption have continued uninterrupted since the Korean War.

Korean adoption might have remained a social phenomenon of the immediate post-war period as it had been in some European nations after World War II, had it not been for the media sensation that surrounded the adoption of eight Korean children by Bertha and Harry Holt in 1955. As a result of this coverage, the Holts received a flood of correspondence from prospective parents interested in adopting from Korea, and the Holts helped many of these people achieve that goal. The Holts went on to establish the Holt Adoption Agency, which initially devoted all its efforts to adoption from Korea. Because the Holt Agency saw itself as fulfilling an evangelical mission, it did not base its placement decisions on standard child welfare criteria—but did require that adoptive parents be Christians.⁸ These practices, and the fact that the Holts' operations did not utilize the services of professional social workers, exposed the agency to strong criticism from social work and child welfare organizations.⁹ This early facilitation by the Holts, whose own attempts to adopt children domestically had been rejected by American adoption agencies, played a huge role in making transnational adoption a viable option for Americans at a time when American adoption criteria barred single persons, those who already had children or could have children, and older adults from becoming adoptive parents. While this was an important step in dismantling the discriminatory policies based on age and economic class that had been used against many prospective parents by the American adoption system, it also created a separate set of standards for the adoption of foreign children—standards that were notably more lenient than those applied to the adoption of American-born children. This divide, opened by the Holts seeking to “rescue” as many Korean children as possible by exploiting the lack of standards around the then-uncommon occurrence of transnational adoption, has never been closed. Even though the Holts and the agency they founded initially restricted their efforts to facilitating the adoption of war orphans and biracial children, eventually American demand for Korean children outstripped this supply, and later the Holt Adoption Agency began placing children who were neither biracial nor war-orphaned, and still does so today.

The initial framing of Korean adoption as both a humanitarian project and an evangelical mission has left an indelible mark on Korean and other transnational adoptions. Although it has been decades since South Korea has needed international humanitarian aid, Korean adoptees are still understood as recipients of charitable, often Christian, acts. Through their position as both a marginalized and a privileged group of Korean immigrants, adoptees have been used as examples both of the best and the worst outcomes of imperial practice—either as beneficiaries of a benevolent imperialism (saved from the barbarities of their birth country through relocation to superior societies) or as victims of involuntary relocation and cultural

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷ This may be at least in part due to the fact that most Korean Americans do not have much contact with Korean American adoptees, and generally do not consider adoptees as part of their diasporic communities.

⁸ Kim, Jae Ran. “Scattered Seeds: The Christian Influence on Korean Adoption.” *Outsiders Within*. Eds. Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah and Sun Yung Shin. New York, NY: South End Press, 2006.

⁹ Herman, Ellen. “Bertha and Harry Holt.” *The Adoption History Project*. Department of History, University of Oregon. Web. 28 Nov. 2008.

commodification (as cultural assets to be acquired by richer, more powerful nations). In this sociopolitical context, transnational adoption can be seen as an imperialist process, born of military, cultural, and economic domination and through which individuals (usually white) from rich and powerful nations adopt individuals (usually not white) from poor nations that are under the political influence of the adopting country. The positions of adoptees in adoptive nations are complicated and often contradictory, in light of their roles as immigrants, citizens, and racialized others.

While transnational adoption started out as a solution for children in crisis, it has become a national custom: it is estimated that more than 200,000 Korean children have now been transnationally adopted worldwide.¹⁰ One reason is because American parents are both able and willing to pay for adoptable children. The South Korean government has been, for the most part, extremely compliant in meeting this demand. In many accounts, the lack of a comprehensive social welfare system in South Korea is directly linked to that nation's export of babies and children by the thousand. This is despite South Korea's rising GNP, which is the highest of any "sending" country in the transnational adoption network of exchange.

Korean transnational adoption was the first sustained intercountry adoption program in history (all previous intercountry adoption programs were temporary, in response to national disasters or emergencies); the current permanent practice of transnational adoption, whereby prospective adoptive parents in the United States or another receiving country can expect to have a choice of countries from which to adopt children, can be traced to Korean adoption. Indeed, most countries that have sought to develop transnational adoption programs have used the South Korean model on some level, since South Korea has the longest-running, most predictable, and most stable overseas adoption program in the world.

The fact that transnational adoption has sustained itself for more than fifty years is also attributable to changing racial preferences and beliefs among the American adopting public, and to social changes in what constitutes an acceptable American family. In addition, transnational adoption is encouraged by current immigration policies that privilege transnational adoptees over any other type of immigrant. However, the current migration of thousands of children a year for the purposes of transnational adoption can all be traced to the first wave of Korean adoptees who arrived in the United States shortly after the Korean War into an American cultural environment of racial assimilation, social conformity, and Cold War sentimentalism about Asia and its children.¹¹

RACIAL HISTORIES OF KOREAN AMERICAN ADOPTION AND THE BEGINNINGS OF AMERICAN TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

Sustained large-scale transracial adoption, including transnational adoptions which were almost always also transracial placements (until Russia and the former Eastern Bloc nations began to open transnational adoption programs in the 1990s),¹² began in the 1950s and continues today. The first recorded Korean transnational adoption took place in 1953,¹³ just five years after the first American domestic transracial adoption of an African American child to a white family.¹⁴ In 1958, just five years after Korean transnational adoption began, the Indian Adoption Project began as a national program with the goal of placing American Indian children in white American homes.¹⁵ Clearly, American domestic transracial adoption as a formal practice barely predates the start of Korean transnational adoption. As a result, the histories of transnational and domestic adoptions are closely interconnected.

¹⁰ Over half were adopted in the United States and Canada, and according to Tobias Hübinette, most of the rest went to European countries and Australia. See Hübinette, Tobias. *Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture*. Diss. Stockholm University, 2006.

¹¹ For a thorough examination of the phenomenon of sentimentalism in the context of the Cold War in Asia, see Klein, Christina. *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*. London, England: University of California Press, 2003.

¹² Selman, Peter. "Intercountry Adoption in the Twenty-First Century: An Examination of the Rise and Fall of Countries of Origin." *Proceedings of the First Korean Adoption Studies Research Symposium*. Eds. Kim Park Nelson, Eleana Kim and Lene Myoung Peterson. 2007.

¹³ Kim, Eleana, personal communication with author, 2006.

¹⁴ Herman, Ellen. "Transracial Adoptions." *Adoption History Project*. Department of History, University of Oregon. Web. 21 Nov. 2008.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Roughly 15,000 transnational adoptions occurred between 1953 and 1962. Greater numbers of these placements took place in the United States starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with 37,469 transnational adoptions from 1965 to 1976.¹⁶ In-country adoption statistics are largely unavailable since 1977, when the U.S. government stopped collecting this information. It is known that 831 black children were adopted into white families in 1975.¹⁷

The increase in transracial and transnational adoptions during the 1960s and 1970s has been attributed to a number of factors. The set of circumstances most cited is the decrease in the number of adoptable white infants during this period due to the greater availability of family planning,¹⁸ combined with the growing number of prospective parents as the baby boom generation reached the age of parenthood, creating high demand for adoptable children. The civil rights movement may have also contributed to the increased popularity of transracial adoption, as efforts to desegregate American society encouraged whites to become more comfortable with the idea of sharing their lives with people of other races. Economic class issues, too, have always been part of adoption history; children born to working class parents are more often given up for adoption.¹⁹ During the 1960s and 1970s, class divisions were strongly correlated with racial categories, as the middle class was made up primarily of educated whites and the working class included more African Americans. At the same time, as the number of adoptable children was decreasing, adoption agencies were becoming more selective in their placements. Stricter screening criteria for adoptive parents included standards for income and age, and a requirement that couples be infertile. These criteria (particularly minimum income requirements) may have restricted access to adoptable African American children by African Americans wanting to adopt²⁰ and indirectly encouraged transracial adoption of non-whites by whites. However, some researchers have also suggested that African Americans were and are less interested in adoption than white Americans: “Evidence seems to suggest that the plight of adoptable black children does not rank high on the list of black adults’ social priorities, even when they seem to be aware of the problem’s severity,”²¹ reinforcing racial divides in the American adoption industry. In 1994, the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) found that relatively few black adoptive families could be found for in-race adoption, though this may be due to the fact that many agencies did not have African Americans on staff and because prospective adoptive parents were poorly recruited in black communities.²²

Despite the similarities and shared histories of transracial and transnational adoptions, transracial adoption of American children has faced significant criticism, especially in the case of African American and Native American adoptions, while transnational adoption has gone largely unquestioned. Opposition to the practice of transracial domestic adoption crystallized in the early 1970s and led to implementation of within-race adoption preferences at many adoption agencies by 1975. Two events during the 1970s signaled a broad shift in attitudes toward transracial adoption.

At its conference in 1971, the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) repudiated transracial adoption, predicting that transracial adoptees would have poor psychological adjustment and racial identity, and be unable to cope with episodes of racism and discrimination without the guidance of a parent of the same color; subsequently, the organization led efforts to end out-of-race adoption of African American children under a stated goal of protecting children and preventing “cultural genocide.” The same year, a meeting of American Indian leaders issued a statement that also identified transracial adoption as “cultural genocide.”²³

In 1978, the federal government enacted the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), prohibiting the transracial placement of

¹⁶ Simon, Rita James and Howard Altstein. *Adoption across Borders: Serving the Children in Transracial and Intercountry Adoptions*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000. 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁸ Pohl, Constance and Kathy Harris. *Transracial Adoption: Children and Parents Speak*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1992. 29.

¹⁹ May, Elaine Tyler. *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995. 142.

²⁰ Pohl, Constance and Kathy Harris. *Transracial Adoption: Children and Parents Speak*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1992. 30.

²¹ Simon, Rita James and Howard Altstein. *Transracial Adoption*. New York: Wiley, 1977. 34.

²² McRoy, Ruth G. “Attachment and Racial Identity Issues: Implications for Child Placement Decision Making.” *Journal of Multicultural Social Work* 3 (1994): 59-74, 70.

²³ Jones, Charles E. and John F Else. “Racial and Cultural Issues in Adoption.” *Child Welfare United States* 58.6 (1979): 374.

American Indian children outside the Indian tribe of their birth without the consent of the tribe in question. This legislation was possible because of the relationship American Indians had with the U.S. federal government; since Indian nations have limited rights of sovereignty with respect to the U.S. government, they can be granted protections and rights as nations that are not available to other groups of American people of color. ICWA also represented an acknowledgment of many decades of governmental abuses of American Indian families, including forced removal of children by placement in white-run boarding schools (1878-1930s) or by adoption into white families (1958-1967).

As domestic transracial adoptions declined throughout the 1970s in response to these two events and the social forces surrounding them,²⁴ many social workers began to question the appropriateness of transracial placements. Organized opposition to transracial adoption in the 1970s, drawing attention to past racism in adoption policies and the potential for future abuse, focused on African American and American Indian populations—minorities that had high visibility in the civil rights movements of the period. In contrast, Asian Americans and Asians living in the United States were much less visible because their populations were relatively small and tended to be concentrated in a few geographic areas. These factors contributed to a popular perception (which continues today) that Asians and Asian Americans did not suffer from racial discrimination and other forms of racism. While the plight of injustices faced by African Americans had been widely publicized by the 1970s, those affecting Asian Americans were not. In addition, tacit beliefs in a racial hierarchy that placed Asian closest to white as the “model minority,”²⁵ contributed to the perception that Asian Americans were not suffering from racism. In light of the emphasis on historical injustices that informed the anti-transracial-adoption position taken by the NABSW and the proponents of ICWA, the perceived absence of racial discrimination against Asian Americans made the transracial adoption of Asians into white homes appear “safe,” and did not evoke the same race-based cultural conflicts that dominated debates on domestic transracial adoption. Not only did the Asian American community not respond negatively to these adoptions (then or now), adoptive parents could believe that their Asian adopted children could expect a life without negative exposure to racism. While an increase in the number of adoptions from other communities or countries was probably not one of the goals of NABSW or the proponents of ICWA, this was certainly a major outcome of these milestones in American adoption history. This demand for adoptable children among the American adoptive public would not be easily suppressed, but would drive a relentless search for other sources of children.

During the 1980s, restrictions on transracial adoptions were challenged in court by white adoptive parents, as well as by the American Civil Liberties Union. Courts were unanimous in ruling that race could not be the chief consideration in adoption, but many states maintained laws limiting transracial adoption.²⁶ In the 1990s, such state laws were largely superseded by new federal legislation regulating the role of race in adoption. The Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) of 1994,²⁷ amended by the Interethnic Placement Act of 1996,²⁸ and the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997²⁹ mandated that transracial adoptions be handled the same way as all other adoptions, and forbade the consideration of race as a factor in determining the suitability of an adoptive placement. MEPA and subsequent adoption-related legislation all but ensured that transracial adoptions would continue, probably with greater frequency than ever before. Though a major rationale behind these acts was to get children into permanent homes as quickly as possible, in 1998, children of color constituted sixty percent of all children in out-of-home care.³⁰ At the present time, many prospective parents do not undertake domestic adoptions because the children available do not match parents’ demands; most prospective adoptive parents seek to adopt healthy infants, while two

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ A number of scholarly works explore the insidious nature of the model minority myth for Asian Americans; one of the most useful is Tuan, Mia. *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?: The Asian Ethnic Experience Today*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

²⁶ Pohl, Constance and Kathy Harris. *Transracial Adoption: Children and Parents Speak*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1992. 33.

²⁷ 103rd Congress, Washington, DC. “The Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994.” P.L. 103-382. 20 Oct. 1994.

²⁸ 104th Congress, Washington, DC. “Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption Provisions,” Section 1808 of P.L. 104-188, “Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996.” 20 Aug. 1996.

²⁹ 105th Congress, Washington, D.C. “The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997.” P.L. 105-89, Titles IV-B and IV-E, Section 403(b), Section 453, and Section 1130(a) of the Social Security Act.

³⁰ McRoy, Ruth G. and Helen Grape. “Skin Color in Transracial and Inracial Adoptive Placements: Implications for Special Needs Adoptions.” *Child Welfare* 78.5 (1999): 674.

-thirds of American children in foster care are over age five and many have health problems or disabilities.³¹

Because American laws generally understand parents to be biologically related to their children, they tend to favor birth parents and generally privilege sanguinary relationships over other types of kinship in establishing custody rights, leaving domestic adoption subject to potential legal challenges. In addition to the NABSW's formal renewal of its position opposing transracial adoption in 1991, a small number of highly publicized court cases resulting in children of color being returned to birth mothers highlighted the possibility that adoptive parents could be forced to give up their children. Public discussions leading up to the passage of MEPA portrayed domestic transracial adoption as controversial, potentially reversible, fraught with emotional risk, and possibly unethical. By the end of the 1990s, these controversies and the new federal legislation had raised public awareness of the potential pitfalls and complications of domestic transracial adoption.

A Transition to Transnational Transracial Adoption

The practice of formalized adoption in the United States began to show growing pains as adoptive families struggled for acceptance as “normal” American families and legal dramas that pitted biological parents against adoptive parents started to become public. Since American family law has historically privileged parents over other family members in custody disputes, the legal foundation for birth parents’ rights to maintain guardianship of their children had been established before legal adoption became commonplace; until recently, this legal corpus was frequently interpreted as favoring biological parents in custody disputes involving adoption. The anxiety created by the prospect of birth families exercising legitimate legal claims to adopted or about-to-be-adopted children in the United States was, and continues to be, a barrier for many prospective parents considering domestic adoption. In contrast, biological parents of foreign children in transnational adoption are largely understood to have no legal rights or claims to the children they relinquish. The scant evidence currently available on transnational adoptions disputed by birth families is largely anecdotal, because these cases are rarely covered by the press, and have generally not resulted in the return of children to birth parents. Instead, it appears that adoption agencies in sending countries often resolve these problems on their own, perhaps taking advantage of the low social and economic positions of birth parents, especially birth mothers. In the free market economics of transnational adoption today, the socioeconomic status of birth mothers who are induced by economic or social pressures to give up their children for adoption works in favor of adoptive parents and the adoption agencies they support.

Since the 1980s,³² the American child welfare system has aggressively used child removal (state removal of children from the custody of their parents, often leading to involuntary termination of parental rights) as a supposedly child-centered remedy for a host of ills, including child neglect or abuse, substance abuse in the home, and the incarceration of parents. Unfortunately, these policies have been unevenly applied to the public, resulting in children from poor, black and brown homes entering the child welfare system in disproportionately high numbers. While this result has undoubtedly made more children in the American child welfare system available for adoption, ironically, it also made this population of potentially adoptable children less appealing to prospective parents because the children are understood to have been damaged by abuse or neglect, by being brought up in harmful environments, or born of “bad stock,”—recalling persistent prejudices against adopted children as “bad seeds.”³³

Because large-scale transnational adoption began in the United States around the same time as domestic transracial adoption, and because, as a practice, it had not faced the same kinds of attacks as domestic transracial adoption, the fact that prospective adoptive parents began to prefer transnational adoption from Korea—which was for many years, the only large-scale sending country in the transnational adoption industry—is not surprising. By the 1970s, South Korea was the only country with a long and established history of overseas adoption and offered an easy alternative for American adoptive parents.

³¹ Clark, Kim and Nancy Shute. “The Adoption Maze.” *U.S. News and World Report* 4 Mar. 2001: 60-66.

³² Roberts, Dorothy. *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2002.

³³ Briggs, Laura and Ana Teresa Ortiz. “The Culture of Poverty, Crack Babies, and Welfare Cheats: The Making of the ‘Healthy White Baby Crisis.’” *Social Text* 21. 3 (2003): 39-57.

Indeed, in the 1970s and 1980s, the number of adoptions from Korea began to rise³⁴ while the numbers of domestic transracial adoptions leveled or dropped off. In 1986, the peak year for Korean transnational adoption, 6,138 Korean children were adopted in the United States,³⁵ while in the following year only 1,411 African American transracial domestic adoptions took place.³⁶ By the 1980s, multiculturalism had begun to gain popularity and the realization of the “rainbow family” including one or more transracially and/or transnationally adopted children came to be seen as a way to put multicultural ideals into practice. However, like with the so-called “weak” multiculturalism³⁷ that became so popular in the 1980s, there were still some critical structural issues in positioning these families as multicultural ideals. Historically (and currently), Korean and other transracial adoption has largely been a white act—that is, the overwhelming majority of children are adopted into homes where both parents and all members of the extended biological family are white. Similar to the embrace of weak multiculturalism among white Americans, these multiracial adoptive families did little to empower communities of color or correct the effects of past racism. Instead, these families imported and placed adoptees as people of color in largely white social contexts, where the experiences of the child’s birth culture could only be vaguely imagined by the adoptive family based on flawed or distorted cues gleaned from popular culture, and assimilation was tacitly or explicitly expected. In the case of Korean adoption, most families did not travel to Korea to obtain their children; most Korean adoptive parents had never even been to Korea at all, and many knew few or no Korean Americans to act as resources for teaching adopted children about Korean culture.

As new legal frameworks and new social attitudes altered the landscape of domestic adoption in America, the number of United States transnational adoptions almost doubled between 1989 and 1998, when 15,744 transnational adoptions were recorded.³⁸ In 1989, South Korea was the only country with a sizable foreign adoption program sending adoptable children to the United States; by 1998, China, Russia, Guatemala, Columbia, India, the Philippines, Vietnam, Romania and Cambodia had also developed transnational adoption programs to the U.S.³⁹ Although South Korea was for decades the most prolific sending country, it has been surpassed by other countries as its own participation in transnational adoption has declined. From fewer than 100 adoptive placements to the U.S. in 1990, adoption from China grew to more than 5,000 children annually by the mid-2000s.⁴⁰ The total number of transnational adoptions has also increased dramatically: the average number of children from overseas adopted each year in the 1970s was less than 5,000; by the 1980s, that number had grown to almost 8,000; and in the 1990s it averaged more than 10,000 per year. In 2006, 20,679 children were adopted from overseas, the largest numbers from mainland China (5,453), Guatemala (4,728), Russia (2,310), Ethiopia (1,255) and South Korea (939).⁴¹ Although detailed statistical records are unavailable, the number of domestic transracial adoptions is believed to be stable, with African American adoption to white homes estimated to represent 1.2 percent of all adoptions in the United States.⁴²

A Social History of Korean American Transnational Adoption

The emergence (and general acceptance) of racially mixed adoptive families since the 1950s is indicative of—and supported by—profound transformations within American society during this period. A progressive liberalization of social attitudes

³⁴ Weil, Richard H. 1984. “International Adoption: The Quiet Migration.” *International Migration Review* 18.2: 276-293; and Pilotti, Francisco. “Inter-country Adoption: Trends, Issues, and Policy Implications for the 1990s.” *Childhood* 1 (1993): 165-177.

³⁵ Pilotti, Francisco. “Inter-country Adoption: Trends, Issues, and Policy Implications for the 1990s.” *Childhood* 1 (1993): 165-177.

³⁶ Simon, Rita James and Howard Altstein. *Adoption across Borders: Serving the Children in Transracial and Intercountry Adoptions*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000. 5.

³⁷ For a discussion of “weak multiculturalism” which attempted to celebrate difference without acknowledging America’s racist national histories and policies, see O’Neill, Daniel I. “Multicultural Liberals and the Rushdie Affair: a Critique of Kymlicka, Taylor, and Walzer.” *The Review of Politics* 61.2 (Spring 1999): 219.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ “Immigrant Visas Issued to Orphans Coming to the U.S.” U.S. Department of State. Web. 13 Mar. 2007.

⁴⁰ Huh, Nam Soon and William J. Reid. “Inter-country, Transracial Adoption and Ethnic Identity: A Korean Example.” *International Social Work* 43. 1 (2000): 75.

⁴¹ “Immigrant Visas Issued to Orphans Coming to the U.S.” U.S. Department of State. Web. 20 Sep. 2008.

⁴² Simon, Rita James and Howard Altstein. *Adoption across Borders: Serving the Children in Transracial and Intercountry Adoptions*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000. 4.

toward race, including the formulation of multiculturalism as a popular ideology, has been complemented by the growth of economic liberalism, including the growth of global markets supporting transracial and transnational consumerism. These two forms of liberalism have worked together to make adoption, particularly adoption from outside the United States, appealing to prospective parents looking for non-biological options to family building.

The ideals of modern social liberalism regarding race achieved wide public acceptance as a result of civil rights movements that began in the 1950s, with empowerment movements affirming the legal and social equality of different groups of people of color. These ideals were subsequently used to support “colorblind” understandings of family formation—commonly rendered in transracial adoption as disregard for racial and genetic differences between white parents and non-white children, focusing instead on the relational bonds forged within the parent-child relationship.

The principles of economic liberalism, notably the encouragement of open access to global free markets for goods and labor, has likewise helped to transform transnational adoption from a small-scale humanitarian intervention to a global industry in which international enterprises compete for resources and market share. Configuring consumer choice as a key right of the individual, economic liberalism (especially during and after the 1970s) has not only encouraged the international transfer of children, but has encouraged adoptive parents to approach the adoption process as an act of consumption in which adoption fees are exchanged for the custody of a suitable child.⁴³ On a transnational scale, this process, sometimes referred to as “globalization,” confers a kind of global citizenship through participation in a global marketplace.

The latter half of the twentieth century was also characterized by rapid advances in reproductive technologies, both scientific and sociopolitical: medical advances such as in vitro fertilization were accompanied by social innovations such as formalized and legally regulated adoption between races, classes and countries.⁴⁴ They continued to become more popular through the 1970s and 1980s, and became commonplace by the 1990s on through the present. However, social critiques and legal obstacles to domestic transracial adoption have limited the number of domestic transracial placements since the 1970s. Domestic transracial placements have not increased, but have stalled since the 1970s, while (first) Korean and (then) other transnational adoption placements have become much more common. Why is this? Opponents of transnational adoption in American communities of color successfully lobbied against the growing incidence of these placements starting in the 1970s. Critiques of transracial adoption by NABSW and in ICWA federal legislation provided both social and legal (in the case of ICWA) pressure to curtail or end American transracial adoptive placements. Even though most transracial domestic adoptions are still legal, prospective adoptive parents seem reluctant to complete them. In contrast, very little public criticism has been voiced about international transracial adoption. Instead, according to adoption advocates Rita Simon and Howard Alstein, parents see the practice as “achiev[ing] instant sainthood.”⁴⁵ Because “[i]n adopting foreign children, the parents feel that they are cooperating in their children’s efforts to burn their bridges. The children have no option but to adapt to the new world. There is no going back.”⁴⁶

IMMIGRATION HISTORIES, FROM LEAST TO MOST WANTED IMMIGRANTS

Making Korean Adoptees American

Although many Korean adoptees do not see themselves as immigrants, they do share many characteristics with the members of immigrant populations, not the least of which is the phenomenon of return migration to the land of their birth. Politically, they are born in countries that are under the imperialist influence of richer, more politically powerful nations. As children

⁴³ Park Nelson, Kim. “Shopping for Children in the International Marketplace.” *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*. Eds. Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Oparah and Sun Yung Shin. Boston: South End Press, 2006.

⁴⁴ Here both medical and social “advances” that enable parenting for infertile couples or individuals are understood as technologies, including both medical procedures and social changes. Through these technologies, cultural expectations of parenting in Western countries have transformed into rights, in that many adults now understand parenting to be an option even if they are unable or unwilling to conceive without medical or legal procedures.

⁴⁵ Rita J. Simon and Howard Alstein. *Transracial Adoption: A Follow-Up*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, D.C. Heath And Company, 1981. 106.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

born to Korean citizens, they are born with legal membership in Korea (though their social membership there may be less certain).⁴⁷ They move to nations that have diplomatic (and historically imperial, in the case of the United States) relations with South Korea. They are perceived to have better economic and social opportunities as a result of this move. The primary difference between Korean adoptees and other immigrants is the relative political ease with which adoptees can make their migratory transition; their immigration aided, sponsored, and advocated for by (usually) white adoptive parents, citizens of some of the richest and most powerful nations in the world.

In spite of these similarities, the fact that Korean American adoptees are included in non-immigrant adoptive families generally prevents them from developing identities as immigrants. Adoptive parents are not generally members of politically or socially marginalized groups; as agents of adoptee immigration, adoptive parents are treated very differently by federal and state agencies than non-adoptee immigrants (who are often neither white nor middle class, and are obviously not citizens). While adoptive parents have to go through lengthy legal procedures as part of the adoption process, these procedures are different from those for other immigrants. As a result, adoptive families can avoid contact with immigrants (and, by extension, any possibility that their children will be legally or socially associated with immigrants) during their dealings with immigration authorities. In short, Korean adoptees, from the moment of their adoption, are considered by their adoptive parents—and by the U.S. government—as children of American nationals rather than as members of an immigrant population.

This policy stands in stark contrast to historic and current policies governing immigration by most other Asians. Of particular note is Chinese exclusion, a set of policies through which Chinese peoples became the first and only group to be prohibited from immigration to the United States solely on the basis of national origin.⁴⁸ The criminalization of immigration to the United States began with Chinese exclusion, and the current state of anti-immigration legislation and immigrant suspicion has deep roots in this history.⁴⁹ Not surprisingly, many of the strategies used by Chinese migrants to undercut immigration law are still in use today by new groups of scrutinized immigrants. The U.S. continues its assault on illegal immigration, currently focusing on Latinos and those of Middle Eastern descent as suspects, one as terrorists, one as illegal immigrants, using tactics which continue to undermine the civil liberties and human rights of its targets.⁵⁰

Historically, immigration policy has greatly influenced the ways in which different immigrant groups are racialized in American society. Chinese exclusion is one example; since 1965, exclusion has given way to a liberalized (though formally deracialized) system of immigrant admission under which federal laws restrict access by most immigrants, but make exceptions for “special” admission of certain professionals and privilege family unification, through which adoptees are able to easily enter the United States as children of American citizens. Asian immigrants have been subject to racializing and class hierarchical placement through unequal access to legal and cultural citizenship. If exclusion and other anti-immigrant policies are on one end of the immigration spectrum, transnational adoption is on the other, offering ease of access for America’s most desired immigrants—child adoptees.

Adoptees from Korea have entered the United States with preferential immigration status since the 1950s, when they were initially admitted as refugees. In 1961, the first piece of federal immigration legislation was passed that specifically included provisions for transnationally adopted children, and since then, they have been admitted to the American immigration queue separately from other immigrants. Since the passage of the Child Citizenship Act in 2000, transnationally adopted children of U.S. citizens have even had access to automatic citizenship, without the legal necessity of a naturalization process. Although the Act was passed before the events of September 11, 2001, this extreme liberalization in immigration and citizenship policy has never been questioned, despite the fact that it privileges certain non-white foreign nationals at a time when most similar

⁴⁷ South Korean nationality law stipulated South Korean citizenship for children born to South Korean fathers until 1997. After 1997, children with a South Korean father or mother would be considered South Korean. From the formation of the South Korean state in 1948 until 1997, children with South Korean mothers and foreign fathers would not have been considered South Korean nationals.

⁴⁸ Lee, Erika. *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. 19-20.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 253.

immigrants are regarded with deep suspicion by immigration authorities and the public, emphasizing the almost total disregard for the status of the adoptee migrant as an immigrant. As transnational adoption has become a common family-building strategy in the United States, understanding adoptees as deracialized members of American families—not as racialized threats in the form of alien immigrants—has become a matter of supporting American families, and is never criticized as leniency in immigration and naturalization law.

The dominant paradigm within federal structures of naturalization is assimilationist: a high degree of assimilation must be demonstrated through language proficiency, cultural competency, and long-term residence before citizenship can be considered. As a response to this framework of a nationalized political system, many researchers theorize that citizenship allows some access to political agency, desirable to immigrants who are minorities in both their naturalization and racial status.⁵¹

Transnational adoptees are assumed to be easily assimilated because they arrive in the United States as young children and are raised by members of dominant sociocultural groups. Because of these perceived advantages, adoptees are placed at the apex of the immigration hierarchy. Raised in the United States, they can be expected to have a native's command of English and to be as well-versed in American culture and society as any other person raised in the United States. They do not carry the family memories of immigration, as most adoptees are adopted too young to remember their own immigration journeys, and they are not accompanied by members of their birth families who might preserve their immigration stories. The only attributes of dominant culture transnational adoptees generally lack are the phenotypical attributes of whiteness. Because of the acceptance of racial minorities as Americans, the lack of whiteness certainly is problematic for many adoptees to navigate, but is not necessarily synonymous with the lack of American-ness. The high acculturation, or pre-assimilation⁵² of adoptees through rearing in American homes warrants the easiest naturalization process of any group of immigrants in the U.S. Indeed, the formation of transnationally adopted children into U.S. citizens seems to be justified through their American parentage and cultural upbringing as “native” Americans.

Immigrants are generally acknowledged as having family in the nation of emigration, from whom they may be separated by citizenship. Thus, for other immigrants, familial ties to a “homeland” or ancestral land are recognized. This condition is more complicated in the case of transnational adoption, because adoptees are physically and legally separated from family in their countries of birth. In many cases, they are also encouraged to sever emotional ties (or are prevented from having these ties in the first place) to birth nation and family. In exchange, they are granted entry into American families and inserted into American genealogies. Through the easy access to citizenship that transnational adoptees enjoy, the adoptive family nation supersedes previous categories of national membership; family and nation are unified, as family units serve as the building blocks of a nation.

For most transnational adoptees today, American citizenship can be taken for granted. The privileged immigration status that adoptees and their families enjoy eases adoptees' political transition into citizenship by virtually guaranteeing their instant naturalization.

Before February 27, 2001 parents had to submit several forms in order to apply for naturalization on behalf of their trans-racial adoptee children, following a procedure specific to transnational adoptees, with no exam or residence requirement for minor children, and with the proviso that at least one parent had to be a citizen of the United States. Even though this process made naturalization considerably easier for adoptive parents than for non-adoptee immigrants, laws concerning the naturalization of transnational adoptees were subsequently changed to make the naturalization process even simpler. Under

⁵¹ See Hing, Bill Ong. “Beyond the rhetoric of assimilation and cultural pluralism: Addressing the tension of separatism and conflict in an immigration-driven multiracial society.” *California Law Review*. 81.4 (1993): 910; and Pickus, Noah. “To Make Natural: Creating Citizens for the Twenty-First Century.” *Immigration and Citizenship in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 1998. 125.

⁵² I use the term *pre-assimilation* to denote the general lack of choice in engaging in assimilative processes for most transnational and transracial adoptees; while assimilation is certainly a survival mechanism for adoptees of color in the America, I argue that it is not generally chosen, but (perhaps inadvertently, but still powerfully and predominantly) assigned by the white families and communities of many adoptees.

the Child Citizenship Act of 2000,⁵³ transnational adoptees under the age of 18 living in the legal and physical custody of a citizen parent automatically receive citizenship when their adoptions are legally finalized.⁵⁴

One of the reasons this legislation was enacted is because many parents were not aware that their transnationally adopted children were not already automatically receiving citizenship.⁵⁵ As a result, transnational adoptees who were never naturalized were subject to deportation (like other non-citizens) if they were ever convicted of a felony. The consequences of deportation in these cases were especially extreme because most transnational adoptees have no cultural ties to their birth countries. This legislation is not without gaps; parents who have not physically contacted their adopted children before adoption (as is true in many cases where parents do not travel to the birth country to pick up their adopted children) are not considered to have a finalized adoption, and must readopt their children in their home states before citizenship will be granted.⁵⁶ In the American assimilationist immigration and naturalization system, the inclusion of transnational adoptees is now a mere formality. Unlike most other groups of immigrants who seek permanent entry into the United States, for transnational adoptees, the gates are wide open.

KOREAN ADOPTEE COMMUNITY HISTORIES

As the adult Korean adoptee population has grown, more and more adoptees have entered public discourses on adoption. Their positions as artists, writers, organizers, activists, and scholars, in conjunction with their identities as Korean adoptees, have given rise to the “public adoptee,”—sometimes lauded as an adoption expert, sometimes denigrated for a supposed lack of objectivity or for a perspective perceived as self-centered.

The members of this loosely connected but growing community of Korean American adoptees often consider their Korean-ness, as well as their adoption experience, to be the basis for creative or scholarly work, as well as for community building with other Korean adoptees. While this group constitutes a small minority of all Korean American adoptees, it is probably the most publicly visible segment of the Korean adoptee population; these are the adoptees who write about their adoption experiences, produce art that comments on what it means to have lived as adoptees, hold social and educational events, provide support programming for adult adoptees, disseminate information about adoption and adoptees to other adoptees, conduct research and write scholarly articles and books, and attend and organize Korean adoption conferences. This small, but visible group of public adoptees has the power to mobilize larger groups of interested adoptees, adoptive families, and others.

While many of these public adoptees do not attempt to advance political agendas of the kind typically associated with “activism,” they may be considered activists nonetheless because of their focus on Korean adoptee identity and experience, which occupies a minority position within both white American and Asian American social structures. Most of these adoptee activists see the act of claiming their Korean adoptee identity as liberatory, in that it is taken in defiance of the assimilationist ideals of colorblindness and whiteness within their white families and communities; many adoptees describe a diminishing relationship to family during and after the expansion of their Korean adoptee identities.

Among the most visible adoptee groups are Also Known As (New York), Asian Adult Adoptees of Washington, AK Connection (Minnesota), and the Global Overseas Adoptees’ Link (GOAL) (Seoul). Despite these groups’ visibility within adoptee communities, political activism focused on controversial issues such as adoption procedures is, by and large, conspicuously absent from their activities. Exceptions include explicitly activist groups such as ASK (Adoptee Solidarity Korea) and TRACK (Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoption Community in Korea) in Seoul, but most of the member groups represented in the International Korean Adoptee Associations (IKAA)—the largest international Korean adoptee

⁵³ 108th Congress, Washington, D.C. “The Child Citizenship Act of 2000.” P.L. No: 106-395. 30 Oct. 2000.

⁵⁴ “Fact Sheet: Child Citizenship Act of 2000.” U.S. Department of State. 2000. Web. 30 April 2003.

⁵⁵ Maguire, Ken. “Law Makes Foreign Adoptees Citizens.” Holt International. 26 Feb. 2001. Web. 30 April 2003.

⁵⁶ Urban, Patricia M. “International Adoption: U.S. Proof of Citizenship.” What You Need to Know About Adoption. Web. 30 April 2003.

umbrella organization—have a decidedly neutral political position. While organizations of adult Korean adoptees might at first glance appear to be ideally situated to support political activism on issues of race and racism, the opposite is generally true; the apolitical stance taken by many leaders within their organizations serves to support adoptees who are recognized as a socially and politically diverse group. Most of the leaders of these groups, while acknowledging their own political beliefs and desires, believe strongly that an apolitical position around adoption—and, to some degree, around race—is important in order to maintain a welcoming atmosphere for all Korean adoptees. This also means that many of the adult Korean adoptee groups emphasize programming focused on socializing and networking among adoptees, allowing the organizations to serve as safe “gateways” to the adoptee community for adoptees who have had limited exposure to other adoptees. Unfortunately, organizations that focus on social activities often fail to retain older members who want more intellectually or politically meaningful programming.

In the late 1990s, conferences for Korean adoptees and their families were organized for the first time in the United States. Two annual adoptee conferences began during this period. In 1998, the Korean American Adoptee/Adoptive Family Network (KAAN) held its first conference for Korean adoptees and their families to discuss adoption issues and develop the adoption community. The conference continues to take place every July, usually in the U.S., though the 2007 conference took place in Seoul.

In 1999, the International Gathering of Adult Korean Adoptees (referred to informally within adoptee communities as “The Gathering”) convened for the first time. Originally sponsored by Holt, the first American adoption agency to facilitate Korean adoptions, the conference is now sponsored and organized by the International Korean Adoptee Associations and its member organizations. Nearly 400 Korean adoptees attended the first “Gathering,” and the conference has since convened again in Norway and twice more in Korea (in 2004 and 2007). The assemblage of adult transracial adoptees at national and international conferences signifies the formation of identity as adoptees within this population. It is also indicative of the large number of Korean adoptees who have come of age and who are seeking adoptee community.

For most Korean adoptees who participate in these types of networking activities, the “community” is limited to other adoptees, and to some degree, to their partners and children. Parents are accepted as part of *adoption* communities, but are generally not included in *adoptee* communities. The difference here is significant and manifests itself personally and politically for adoptee leaders as they engage in adoptee community building—and for some parents who don’t grasp the difference. For example, the 2004 attempt to organize a Gathering of Korean adoptees in Seoul over the summer of 2004 resulted in a request from KAAN, the only American national organization for families of Korean adoptees, to participate in conference organizing. Because of KAAN’s status as an adoptive-parent-run organization, this request was denied, despite KAAN’s stated mission of supporting Korean adoptees; organizers of the Gathering were adamant that an experience that supported interests and needs of adoptees could not also cater to adoptive parents; though an adherence to this principal may have damaged organizational and personal relationships. In the end, parents were allowed to register for the conference (though few did) but were barred from attending most sessions, which were designated as “adoptee-only.” The inclusion or exclusion of adoptive parents in other adoptee-organized events, such as lectures, readings, or discussions, is a topic of explicit discussion and decision making within Korean adoptee groups. While some adoptee-run groups include parents in community building efforts, they are also careful to program events for adoptees only.

The Emergence of Adoptee Artists and Academics

A cohort of Korean adoptee artists has recently begun to emerge, and through the public display and consumption of their work, have brought early attention to the experience of Korean American adoptees. While these artists’ works hardly represent the experience of all adoptees, it does resonate with many, and has changed the terms of American public discourse around transnational Asian adoption. While the general public still broadly understands Korean and other Asian adoptees as child foundlings who are lucky to have the opportunity to become American, artists such as memoirists Jane Jeong Trenka and Katy Robinson, filmmakers Deann Borshay Liem, Nathan Adolphson, Tammy Chu, and Jennifer Arndt Johns, poets

Jennifer Kwon Dobbs, Lee Herrick and Sun Yung Shin, and visual artists Kate Hers, Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine, and Jane Jin Kaisen have begun to perforate these tranquil images with much more complicated realities.⁵⁸ Like artists the world over who are motivated by the need to express themselves and represent their experiences, these artists have been among the first to challenge dominant white narratives of transnational adoption as an emotionally seamless act of child salvation; instead, they wrestle with the grittier realities of identity crisis, displacement, birth family loss, and American racism. They have done so despite resistance to these stories in many adoption communities, created to support adoptive parents. Their efforts have paved the way toward a more unified adoptee identity, as early orators of complicated and often painful adoption experiences that have now been retold over and over in adoptee networking groups and to adoption researchers.

Behavioral scientists have conducted research on transracial adoptees since the 1970s, but in the last 10 years, transnational and transracial adoption studies have become a burgeoning field (probably related to the heightened visibility of transnational and transracial adoptees as more and more become adults). As has been the case in many new fields, most adoptees and other academics studying Korean adoption are still junior scholars developing new ideas and research within more traditional fields the same time period has been notable for the emergence of the adoptee academic.

At once observers and participants, these “insider” researchers in the field of adoption studies produce work that echoes the activist battle cry for inclusion: “Nothing About Us Without Us!” The evolving position of these adoptee academics calls to mind historical upheavals in many academic disciplines touched off by the entry into the academic mainstream of scholars from ethnic and cultural groups that had been traditional subjects of academic inquiry; among other effects, these upheavals led to the creation of new disciplines such as Ethnic Studies and Women’s/Gender/Sexuality Studies that began as fields by, about and for these same groups. Community-based and adoptee-centered methodologies lead to significant differences in both research questions and outcomes. In these community-based research efforts, there is more emphasis on social, psychological, political and cultural consequences of Korean adoption than ever before. Instead of the traditional reliance on parental perspectives and the interpretation of adoption as only a family-building strategy, there is now greater interest in and research on the life experiences of individual adoptees. This new emphasis in Korean Adoption Studies opens the door to new areas of sociocultural inquiry: the effects of raising non-white persons in white families; the meaning of whiteness and the role of race in family, society and politics; and the complex and multilayered identities of transnationally adopted persons. In addition, this community-based research is linked to social justice movements and to anti-imperialist and anti-colonial ideologies through its critiques of the racism, geopolitical imbalances, class discrimination, and sexism against women in the global East and South (who are deemed to be less worthy of parental rights in comparison with white women in the global North and West) that are inherent in the current configuration of adoption from Korea (and from many other countries). Finally, the role of Korean Adoption Studies research has now been peeled away from the interests of the adoption industry, because an adoptee-focus is (and sometimes must be) independent of the adoption process and the pursuit of “best practices” for adoption procedures.

For those adoptees who choose to participate in public discourse about adoption, whether as artists, activists, organizers, or academics, the role of the public adoptee carries many potential liabilities and benefits. Personal stakes can be high, and for many, the separation of work and personal life becomes a foregone luxury, or at least a hard-fought accomplishment. The benefits, however can also be high, as Korean and other transracial and/or transnational adoptees finally articulate their experiences and ideas about the overlapping and intersecting categories of race, class, gender, family, policy, and nation that make transnational adoption such a rich and productive site of inquiry.

⁵⁸ Anthropologist Eleana Kim has written about the phenomenon of Korean adoptee artists in scholarly journals and in her dissertation, see “Our Adoptee, Our Alien: Transnational Adoptees as Specters of Foreignness and Family in South Korea.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 80. 2 (2007): 497-531; and “Remembering Loss: The Cultural Politics of Overseas Adoption from South Korea.” Diss. New York University, 2007.

Making Adoptees Korean Again: Korean American Adoptees in Seoul

If American orphan visas and the Child Citizenship Act of 2000 make Korean adoptees American, the South Korean F-4 visa can make them Korean again—at least for as long as they choose to stay in South Korea. This special visa for overseas Koreans, created in 1999 by the Act on the Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans and partially in response to appeals for permanent legal residency by Korean adoptees living in South Korea, is available exclusively to “overseas Koreans”—those with verifiable past citizenship in South Korea and their descendants.⁵⁹ The F-4 is the least restrictive of any South Korean residence visa, granting all the rights of native Koreans (except voting), including unlimited entry and exit privileges, the right to own property and businesses, and the right to reside in South Korea without a work-related sponsor. The F-4 has a two-year term, but may be renewed indefinitely. It is as close to South Korean citizenship as any foreign national can get.

The F-4 has attracted controversy because it is only available to overseas Koreans who were born as or are descended from South Korean citizens, mainly diasporic migrants who reside in western nations; the visa is not available to the descendants of those who left Korea before the establishment of the South Korean state in 1948, including 5.65 million other ethnic Koreans, many living in China, Russia, and Japan.⁶⁰ For this reason, the Act has been attacked as discriminatory against the ethnic Koreans in these locations, especially the Korean-Chinese. In addition, there has been critical reaction to the promotion of unity among ethnic Koreans over other those of other ethnicities that live and work in Korea.⁶¹

Since Korean adoption did not formally begin until 1953, all Korean adoptees are eligible for the F-4 visa, though the application process can be onerous. In order to obtain an F-4, an adoptee must provide documentation of onetime Korean citizenship, as well as documentation of the loss of that citizenship. Proving current citizenship is seldom a hardship, but to obtain proof of Korean ancestry, adoptees must obtain their Korean family registry, or *hojeok*, which lists the entire known patrilineal family; because these records are generally accurate and complete genealogies, they are the basis on which claims of citizenship can be made. Adoptees who have no information on birth family must obtain an orphan *hojeok*, which contains only themselves from their Korean adoption agency in order to fulfill the requirement for proof of past Korean citizenship.

Many adoptees who have located their Korean birth families determine that an orphan *hojeok* is still logistically preferable. Many were never entered into family *hojeoks*, or were removed after adoption. Even if the adoptee's name appears in their birth family *hojeok*, the information may conflict with documentation from the adoptee's other records, because important personal details like birthdates, parental identities, and family circumstances are often changed by adoption agencies in the adoption process; the orphan *hojeok* can be made to be a better match to the adoptee's American identity papers, removing the possibility of conflicts of information within the visa application materials. Additionally, since adoptees' legal identities are completely changed through the adoption process, the adoptee with access to birth family records may have no way to legally prove that he or she is the person as listed on their birth family *hojeok*.⁶²

For adoptees who seek the F-4 visa, the irony in claiming legal orphan status in order to re-connect with Korea, Korean people, and possibly Korean birth family, is enormous. Unlike other overseas Koreans, who must show a familial connection to other Koreans to obtain an F-4, adoptees usually must present documentary evidence that they share no biological relationship with any other Korean citizen—in the Korean context, they are not related to anyone. Only by acknowledging the total loss of their identities can overseas adoptees regain their status as Koreans.

While the F-4 visa provides a readily accessible legal toehold for adoptees to live and work in South Korea among Korean people, it is far from clear that adoptees truly “become Korean” simply because the South Korean government removes legal

⁵⁹ Yoon, In-Jin. “A Comparison of South and North Korean Policy for Overseas Koreans.” Paper Presentation. *International Conference on the Korean Diaspora and Strategies of Global Korean Network*. Korea University, Seoul, Korea. 11 Oct. 2002.

⁶⁰ Lee, Jeanyoung. “Korea's Policy for Ethnic Koreans Overseas.” *Korea Focus* 11.4 (2003): 108-132.

⁶¹ Jeon, Jaeho. “Changes in the Korean Identity in the Globalization Era.” *Quarterly New Asia*. New Asia Research Institute. Col 12, No 1 (2005).

⁶² Jeong Trenka, Jane. “Adoption is a Feminist Issue: Towards and Imaginative Feminism.” Conference Paper. *Conference of the Korean Association for Feminist Studies in English Literature*. Korea University, Seoul, Korea. 9 June 2007.

barriers to their return migration. Instead, many of the adoptees who live in Korea find little acceptance in Korean society, and are deeply folded into adoptee communities, where they can connect with others who have similar experiences as themselves. Most Korean adoptee ethnic return migrants plan to stay in Korea for periods ranging from one to five years and do not consider a permanent move to Korea to be a viable option.

CONCLUSION

Today, South Korea is no longer the country that sends the most adoptees to the United States or to Western nations. International attention during the Seoul Olympics in 1988 exposed a deep sense of national shame about continuing to send unwanted children away. Since the 1990s, South Korea's economic growth—it is now the world's sixteenth largest economy—has also contributed to a decrease in the number of adoptees South Korea is willing to send out of the country, and it appears likely that South Korean transnational adoption will end completely in the near future. China, Russia, and Guatemala are now among the top adoptee-sending countries, each sending thousands of children to the U.S. every year. As South Korea “bows out” as a sending country, poorer countries are induced to step in and respond to the American demand for adoptable children. Looking further into the future, a number of other nations including Mexico, Bolivia, Columbia, Peru and Ethiopia appear to make up the next set of major sending countries. Meanwhile, American domestic transracial adoption continues at a stable rate of about 1,200 children annually.

Transracial adoption affects Asian American, African American, American Indian and Latina/o communities in America, as well as white American communities into which most of these adoptees are placed. While Korean adoptees are not the only transracial adoptees, they are currently the largest group of adult transracial adoptees, and are the only group of transracial adoptees in America who have self-organized into networking and political advocacy groups based solely on their shared identities as adoptees. Thus, Korean adoptees are in a position to advocate for other transracial adoptees, as well as for generations to come. In 20 years, Chinese American adoptees will likely constitute the largest population of adult transracial adoptees; in 40 years, it might be Ethiopian American adoptees. The struggles of these future generations of transracial adoptees will almost certainly be influenced by the leadership and political activity of current Korean adoptee organizations today. Research on today's adult Korean adoptees lays the foundation for future comparative explorations of the issues affecting current and future transracial adoptee populations.