

Korea must stop overseas adoption
(from *Korea Herald* 1/3 2005)

Between 1953-2003 and for more than half a century ever since the Korean War ended, 154,573 Korean children have been adopted to 15 different Western countries: United States (102,606), France (11,042), Sweden (8,830), Denmark (8,518), Norway (5,993), Netherlands (4,099), Belgium (3,697), Australia (3,039), Germany (2,352), Canada (1,739), Switzerland (1,111), New Zealand (559), Luxembourg (468), Italy (382) and England (72). It is a fact that no other country in the world has ever sent away so many of its own citizens for overseas adoption in modern history, and still every year between 2,200-2,400 children leave Korea for adoption to United States, France, Denmark, Norway, Netherlands, Australia, Canada and Luxembourg.

Today, Korea is one of the 20th richest countries in the world, and a global leading nation in IT technology. Among the 20 or so countries allowing their children to be sent away for overseas adoption to Western countries like Colombia, Ecuador, Ethiopia, China, Vietnam and the Philippines, Korea sticks out as being the only industrialized and democratic country doing so. Furthermore, Korea is also one of the countries in the world having the lowest fertility rate besides having an unbalanced sex ratio, something that again makes continuing overseas adoption to look strange, unnecessary and outdated.

Because of Korea's leading global role in the field of overseas adoption, the image of Korea is extremely negative in many Western countries due to the massive presence of adopted Koreans. In Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Norway, Luxembourg and Belgium there are very few Koreans who have emigrated voluntarily, so the ethnic Korean presence is in other words in those countries made up of adopted children and adoptees from Korea. This has caused Western people to believe that Korea is a poor military dictatorship that is still suffering from the effects of the Korean War. Korean companies like Samsung and Hyundai are thought to be Japanese, Korea people are thought to be stupid and Korean culture to be primitive. Besides, many Westerners also think that it is wrong for a country to export and sell its own children and in the end to destroy its own future. There is certainly a risk for Korea to lose credibility and goodwill in Western countries, and opportunities for investment and tourism because of continuous overseas adoption, which naturally provokes associations to war, corruption, social unrest, poverty and authoritarianism.

Another fact is that Korea is rated as number 63 out of 70 countries on the Gender Empowerment Index making it comparable to countries like Bangladesh, Yemen and Honduras in terms of gender inequality and oppression of women. Moreover, Korea is repeatedly criticized by United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for not implementing measures to counter discrimination based on sex, while its Committee on the Rights of the Child expresses concern for the continuance of overseas adoption from a country that has the world's 12th largest economy.

During the 1950s mixed children fathered by American soldiers were dispatched to avoid stigmatization, and during the 1960s and 1970s children of young factory workers

who were relinquished out of poverty dominated overseas adoption. However, from the 1980s and even more since the 1990s, the absolute majority of children who are nowadays sent to foreign countries are born by young and unwed girls attending high school or college. These young girls in their teenage of early 20s, often from a middle-class background, are locked in secretly at maternity homes belonging to the adoption agencies as soon as they get to know that they are pregnant. At the maternity homes, they are persuaded to relinquish their children to save the honor of their families and in reality to feed the adoption agencies' need of a steady supply of children for overseas adoption. In other words, a combination of patriarchal attitudes and economic greed lies behind today's overseas adoption from Korea, and thus the rights of both women and children are completely ignored.

Finally, new scientific research has come to light in Sweden showing that overseas adoptees of Sweden of whom most are from Korea have substantial problems to establish themselves as adults in terms of getting a job and creating a family. For example, 60 percent of the overseas adoptees have a job compared to 77 percent among ethnic Swedes, and half of the overseas adoptees up belong to the lowest income category compared 29 percent of the Swedes. This means that there is widespread discrimination against Korean adoptees on the labor market, and when they get a job they are low-paid. Moreover, 29 percent of the overseas adoptees are married compared to 56 percent of Swedes, meaning that Korean adoptees are considered unattractive and have problems to find a spouse. Other studies show high levels of psychiatric illness, drug and alcohol addiction, criminality and suicide among Sweden's overseas adoptees. The most shocking finding is that the suicide rate is 500 percent higher among overseas adoptees than among ethnic Swedes.

So if Korea is to be acknowledged in the Western world as an advanced and modern industrialized and democratic nation and in the end to gain self-respect, overseas adoption has to be stopped and the rights of children to single mothers and their have to be protected instead of sending them to Western countries were they suffer from discrimination, racism, suicide and psychiatric problems.

Tobias Hübinette

Adopted from Korea and Ph.D. candidate in Korean Studies at Stockholm University, Sweden, who writes about the Korean adoption issue and Korean images of overseas adopted Koreans as his dissertation project.