

## **Korea Herald 24/8 2005: Adoptee fights to end heartaches of Korean children brought up by foreign parents**

One of modern Korea's recurring heartaches is the high rate of adoptions since the 1950-53 Korean War and problems of grown-up adoptees who return to their homeland to find their roots and answers to why they were abandoned by their parents.

Tobias Hubinette - or Lee Sam-dol, a Korean adoptee who was sent to Sweden in 1972 - is trying to publicize the agonies of Korean adoptees with a series of studies of the adoption issue whose ultimate aim is to stop Korea sending large numbers of children abroad to be brought up by foreigners.

"Korea is now a very modernized country and progressively democratized, too. But 2,400 Korean children are still sent to the Western world every year, creating unnecessary tragedies," he said in an interview with The Korea Herald. He has previously said a total of 154,573 Korean children were adopted by families in 15 countries between 1952 and 2003.

Hubinette, a Ph.D. candidate in Korean studies at Stockholm University in Sweden, presented his thesis on the problems of international adoption - the first academic approach on the issue - at the sixth annual conference of the Global Overseas Adoptees' Link held at Konkuk University in Seoul last week. GOAL is a local-based organization supporting Korean adoptees in trying to find their identity as Koreans and to understand their homeland.

"In 1961, Korea as a military regime, the Park Chung-hee government, started to pass the Orphan Adoption Special Law to facilitate international adoption as an alternative to costly institutional care. And through the Chun Doo-hwan era, they even deregulated the law by allowing adoption agencies to compete with each other to track down unrestricted numbers of adoptable children," Hubinette said.

"As a result, the adoption industry thrived as it was able to seek our business, and it sent 70,000 children abroad in a decade, an easy way out of avoiding social welfare expenditure for the Korean government combined with Korea's patriarchal, heterosexist norm, system."

Hubinette believes the adoption outflow has to stop now and feels it is certainly up to the government.

"I was very disappointed, when I met officials from the Health and Welfare Ministry a few years ago, that they easily institutionalized the belief that sending their children to Western countries is the best solution for abandoned children," he said.

Hubinette strongly suggests that the government should take the initiative to solve the chronic problem.

"Of course, not only Korea faces such problems stemming from teenagers' unwanted pregnancies. Sweden in the nineteen sixties also faced the problem and it was really serious. But the (Swedish) government supported the young single parent by facilitating foster homes.

"In this way, I believe Korea, too, can prevent more tragedies from happening in the future."

Asked how he feels about the views of many Koreans that adoption for unwanted children offers them a better life, he said, "Of course they would have a good life from a rich, abundant family. But the problem rises when they get older, when they find it hard to reach the same level as their white parents."

Hubinette referred to research which showed that the suicide rate among adoptees in Sweden is five times higher than among other citizens.

"They (adoptees) were well-fed, well-educated, but that's not all. They suffer so much from discrimination, from racism ... that led them to fall into drug and alcohol addiction and to commit crimes and suicides," he said.

Hubinette did not provide details of the research. However, in a letter to The Korea Herald earlier this year, Anders Arvelid, the president of a Swedish company in Korea who has two adopted daughters from Korea, said a study conducted by professor Anders Hjern in Sweden in 2002 showed 82 percent of boys adopted from Korea and 92 percent of girls show no sign of mental health disorders or social maladjustment.

A well-known Swedish politician, Tove Lifendahl, an adoptee from Korea, in an article in the biggest newspaper in Sweden, says that the overwhelming majority of adopted Korean children in Sweden live as happy a life as anyone else in the country, Arvelid wrote.

Hubinette says the true agony of overseas adoptees around the world is "finding their identity." This is the biggest problem that most of adoptees face in everyday life.

"To live as an adoptee is like belonging to nowhere - you are neither Korean nor Western. You become a stranger without knowing why and how," he said.

Hubinette himself was found abandoned on a train bound to Seoul from Yeosu, in the southern part of the country, and adopted later by a Swedish couple.

"So, it has been really difficult to track where exactly I was abandoned, but I won't give up the hope to find my parents," he said.

By Cho Chung-un