

Solidarity Among Korean Overseas Adoptees

Forging a Worldwide Community



How does one approach the topic of “Korean overseas adoption,” an extremely complex subject with a discomfiting historical past, in order to fathom the experience of being adopted overseas? Shall it be interpreted as a tragic loss, a happy ending, or somewhat more ambiguously or neutrally? Where to begin or end without embellishing, distorting or affirming stereotypical notions of an homeless orphan, either impoverished or born out of wedlock, perhaps to a US G.I.? Although there are such instances, they don’t represent every case — situations vary with different social pressures and complexities, so the oft-heard rationale of “we were poor back then” just doesn’t explain why Korean overseas adoption is continuing to occur even into the 21st century and beyond. There needs to be a solid challenge to certain preconceptions and long-existing social welfare practices that seem complacent towards true reform or evaluation.

Korean overseas adoptees, more than 200,000 in total, are just one of the

many displaced and diasporic groups of ethnic Koreans who now make their homes abroad. Korean overseas adoption and, moreover, international adoption, also known as intercountry or transnational adoption, has steadily expanded to other nations like China, Russia, Guatemala and Vietnam. These countries have no intention on ceasing overseas adoption in the near future, as long as the demand for babies is strong and a steady cash flow keeps pouring in. This is why most Korean adoptees, who grew up in the 60s, 70s and 80s with a limited amount of resources and help, have been holding informal social meetings with a small but growing group of adoptees to share their experiences and interests in Korean culture. With so many Korean adoptee associations existing in major cities around the world, there was a need to collectively form a network that would bring Korean adoptees together on a regular basis. Hence, the idea of forming IKAA, a worldwide network of Korean adoptees that was launched in 2004 in Seoul.

Little did anyone know that this would create a domino effect that would be of paramount significance for such future gatherings and a worldwide community of adoptees to promote pro-activism, solitary and bonds of friendships that are sometimes even stronger than family ties, to acknowledge the existence of Korean adoptees and address the issue of international adoption beyond Korea itself.

IKAA Gathering 2007

This past summer, about 600 adoptees and their families, from a total of 15 different countries stretching around the globe (including Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Sweden, the US, Australia and others), gathered in Korea for the 2nd Gathering of IKAA (International Korean Adoption Associations). The week-long conference was filled with exciting programs such as an Adoptee World Cup Soccer Tournament, the *Hanbok* Fashion Show, an art exhibition, as well as work-

shops ranging from “Representations of International Adoption in Korean Media and Popular Culture” to “Learning Korean Language and Living in Korea.”

First International Korean Adoption Studies Research Symposium

On July 31, the first international Korean Adoption Studies Research Symposium kicked off the IKAAA Gathering 2007. The idea of a symposium was initiated by Tobias Hubinette and Dae-won Wenger, and was skillfully handled by three moderators, Kim Park Nelson, a US adoptee researcher, Eleana Kim, a Korean American Assistant Professor of History at Dartmouth College, and Lene Myong Peterson, a Danish adoptee who is currently a PhD candidate. Hubinette said the research symposium turned out to be even more successful than he had envisioned. “Apparently, research on Korean adoption/adoptees is exploding right now, and the symposium was able to manifest this through its papers and presenters,

square off in the finals. For some, a case of heat rash and over-exhaustion was the challenge. Others, like Sweden, had an unlucky break, or went slack after qualifying to the next round. Netherlands seemed to be the team to beat, but as the



finals came around, the two remaining teams were US coastal and US central. With the soccer-mad Euro nations, who would have ever guessed? It was a close, evenly-matched game, with US central boasting a dynamic cheerleading squad in matching outfits and shaking pom-poms, chanting, “Midwest is still the Best!” — complete with pyramid formations — even as the trophy went to US coastal. But everyone was a winner that day, beating the grueling, hot sun with all the cheers and support.

Two Special People Who Made the Magic Happen

The main individuals responsible for making this all happen are Tim Holm, President of IKAA, and Liselotte Hae-Jin

Birkmose, Vice President. Both Korean adoptees themselves and prominent leaders in the international adoptee community, they’ve been committed and passionately vocal about helping Korean adoptees gain acknowledgment and proper treatment, not as orphans or pitiful children who are helpless and lost, but enfranchised human beings entitled to their rights. Tim and Lisa worked successfully as a team, organizing the event with great concern and compassion about both the issues and individuals. Attendees, in turn, were able to display their gratitude by helping to celebrate Tim’s birthday and, at the closing ceremonial brunch, honor Lisa’s contributions during her 10 year tenure as President of Korea Klubben, the Danish adoptee association. A standing ovation was a fitting end to the event.

Behind the Scenes: Planning and Organizing IKAA

Planning such a huge event was also enabled by a strong planning committee made up of members from each respective adoptee association in Europe, North America and Korea — they provided the muscle to make a lot of activities possible. According to Nicole Sheppard, the Vice Secretary of G.O.A.L (Global Overseas Adoptee Link) in Korea and a Korean adoptee originally from Minnesota, the actual planning of the IKAA Gathering 2007 took more than a year and a half of coordinating the 10 IKAA member associations. This included several in-person meetings during that time in Europe and Korea, and smaller gatherings in the US, as well as regularly scheduled weekend conference calls or online chats spanning five different time zones at all times of the day and night to coordinate efforts among different committees for all the programs. Personal commitment and perseverance, as well as a broader vision for positively impacting the adoptee community, were required to mount such a large-scale conference. Says Sheppard, “It took a large committed group of people to pull everything together,” with the main organizers and planning committee members joining forces to bring together a large number of guest speakers, researchers and sponsors.

Sponsors for the IKAA Gathering 2007 included the Overseas Koreans Foundation, Korea Racing Association, Samsung, Korea Culture Network, Cheontae Buddhist Order, Ministry of Health and Welfare, Sofitel Ambassador Hotel, Kongju National University, Kyunghee University, Dongguk University, Korean Tourism Organization, Kookmin Bank and Nike (US). The attendees were overwhelmed with the welcome and hospitality, extending special thanks to the IKAA board of directors and planning committee members, as well as all the sponsors and benefactors who helped make IKAA Gathering 2007 possible — it was truly a special and memorable event for all. The next Mini-Gatherings are scheduled for next year in Las Vegas (January) and Hawaii (October), and are greatly anticipated. For more information about IKAA, visit IKAA.info.

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Photos courtesy of Eric Dewald, Amanda Lovell and Sebastian Vanderlinden