

# A movement from the grassroots

Advocacy organization launches projects in adoptee films, scholarship and business in Korea | BY JENNY NA

These days, important trips back to South Korea have been made easier by the existence of several support adoptee-centered organizations in Korea.

One of these is the KoRoot Guesthouse (*bari ui jib*) a non-profit guest house and advocacy organization located in a picturesque section of Seoul's historic Hoyoja neighborhood. For five years, it has provided low-cost housing, organized community events and other services for the growing community of ethnic Koreans worldwide connected through adoption.

Many overseas adopted Koreans return to Korea to search for family, learn language, discover culture or just check the place out.

KoRoot is tucked away from the street, past a small front lawn with a garden that blooms brightly with flowers in the summer. Inside, rooms on the first and second floors have space for 16 people. On the first floor, there is a long dining table surrounded by a photo exhibition featuring the work of adoptee artists.

On most days, a group of adoptees sit around the table and discuss the challenges of life in Korea or the previous night's adventures in Hongdae, a popular Seoul hot spot. Sometimes, the conversation veers back around to the subject of adoption and those gathered share their experiences with birth family members or thoughts about returning to Korea. The atmosphere this creates is one of community, open to anyone who visits.

Overseas adopted Koreans began returning to Korea in the 1980s. Although the Korean government keeps no official numbers on the presence of adopted Koreans in the country, the number has grown each year and is now estimated to be between 3-5,000 people from over 15 countries annually.

When adoptees first began making return trips to Korea, there were few services to help them. Since then, organizations like KoRoot have helped to fill the void. KoRoot organizes social events, poetry readings, concerts, exhibitions and workshops, and provides counseling and translation services as well.

KoRoot is managed by a small staff



Rev. Do-hyun Kim and wife Ae-kong Jung Photo by Stephen Wurrow

that includes Rev. Do-hyun Kim, a Presbyterian minister, and his wife, Ae-kong Jung, a composer; Mina Kim, the KoRoot administrator, and a group of volunteers who help with events. In addition to managing the guesthouse, they provide occasional translation or interpretation when guests need help with phone calls or letters and are always up for conversation. All have lived in other countries.

KoRoot is overseen by an advisory committee of adoptees living in Korea. The committee was created by Kim, who wants to let the adoptees in the community guide him. Kim's vision of giving voice to, and creating space for adopted Korean people in Korean society that has provided the inspiration for KoRoot's activities.

Kim and his family lived in Switzerland for nine years in the 1990s, where he helped found the adoptee group *Dongari*. The family then moved to England for three years, where Kim earned his graduate degree in philosophy.

It was during this time that he began to form his ideas about adoption, which can seem quite "radical" to people unfamiliar with adoption issues, as one researcher described them.

"After meeting adoptees in Switzerland, I came to feel adoption was not the right answer," Kim says. For him, the adoption issue was

related to racism in Europe and his own experiences outside of Korea. "Many adoptees living in Switzerland were regarded as migrants or tourists and not accepted as Swiss, which made me realize that even though their internal identity was Swiss, it was their external identity that created confusion for other people in the society."

Some of the adoptive parents he met there "had fear in their faces," which indicated to him that they may not have been completely comfortable with their decision to adopt. "I worried that because they regarded me as intruder, it was possible they could also regard their children in the same way."

Kim understands this feeling of discomfort and says he always feels "a little uncomfortable," wondering what his place is in a community in which he is not a member of the adoption triad formed by adoptive parents, birth parents and adoptees. His time abroad also makes him an outsider of sorts in Korea.

These experiences have sensitized him to the issues adoptees face when returning to Korea, where they often feel they are on the outside of language or culture. He has since come to see his role as that of liaison between adoptees and Korean society.

"In Korean society, adoptees are often regarded as children and people are always speaking for them. I

hope that I can help to bring adoptee voices to Korean society," he says. However, he is conscious of the kind of power this can confer and is careful not to intrude on adoptees' ability to speak for themselves.

Still, he wants to challenge Korean society through his role. His passion for adoption has led him to initiate a number of projects focused on doing just that.

## Resilience: Giving Voice to Korean Birth Mothers

While in England, Kim wrote his master's thesis on Korean birth mothers that incorporated feminist theory and the ideas of the *minjung* movement, which is associated with Korea's democratization efforts during the 1980s.

While he has maintained his interest in the issue of Korean birth mothers, he is now more concerned with family welfare policy. "I am interested in how the Korean government can organize the social welfare system for single mothers so they can raise their children on their own and do not have to be separated by adoption. I hope that single mothers can someday be accepted by society, so that they are no longer stigmatized." The strong stigma in Korean society against being single, pregnant and unmarried often forces women to hide their pregnancies from their families, co-workers and friends. This, combined with a lack of social welfare services for women and underprivileged families, can also

result in their relinquishing their children for adoption.

Kim's research and interest in the women who place children for adoption led him to involvement with the first-ever film documentary on the topic of Korean birth mothers. Entitled *Resilience*, the film is directed by Korean American adoptee Tammy Chu, and follows the story of a Korean birth mother as she reunites with her son and takes a close look at the issue of intercountry adoption from Korea through interviews with adoption agency professionals, social workers and government officials. (See interview with co-producer Anthony Gilmore, page 67)

Kim says, "Korean society doesn't talk about birth mothers. They may appear briefly in the media, but are generally forgotten. The women have not had a chance to tell their own stories because it is not socially acceptable and they fear that they will be stigmatized. The subject is still taboo."

Kim hopes the film will raise awareness about the issues faced by unwed single mothers in the Korean public. He also hopes that it will serve as a catalyst for dialogue among all members of the adoption triad.

Documentary filmmaker Tammy Chu's *Searching for Go-hyang* has earned critical acclaim for its portrayal of her experience of reconnecting with her birth family and the questions it raised about the adoption issue. She is the director and co-producer of the film, which was awarded funding from the Pusan International Film Festival's Asian Network of Documentary Fund and will premiere at the festival in 2009.

"Over the years, many Korean women have been persuaded to give up their children, but none of the women we interviewed wanted to relinquish their children. They were told that adoption was the best choice for their children, and many felt that because they did not have social or economic support from their families and the government, which has used adoption as a form of social welfare, they really had no other option. But they have never been able to recover from this loss and continue to live with guilt, shame and isolation," Chu said.

Following the film's premiere, Kim hopes to organize a special screening in Seoul, and wants the film to be distributed to festivals, shown within the adoptee community in Korea and abroad and screened for general audiences in Korea.

### Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Translation and publication in Korean

Kim also approached Swedish Korean adoptee author/researcher Tobias Hubinette about translating into Korean his book *Comforting an Orphaned Nation* (Jimoondang Publishing Co.). The Korean-language edition of the book, which examines the social and political aspects of intercountry adoption from Korea as well as representations of Korean adoptees in the media and popular culture, was published in August 2008 with the Korean title *Overseas Adoption and Korean Nationalism* (Sonamoo Publishing Co.).

Hubinette was eager to have his work made available to the Korean public. "The aim of the translation for me, for Rev. Kim and for the translation team was to publish a critical academic monograph on the Korean adoption issue, to be able to make an impact on the current Korean adoption policy and debate," Hubinette said.

The feedback, he says, "has been satisfying in terms of reviews in Korean newspapers, and in terms of positive feedback from various Korean scholars from different disciplines."

### Looking back, looking forward: Adoption Research Center and archive

Hubinette began collecting "everything connected to Korean adoption and adoptees from around 1997-98." That collection has since grown into one of the most comprehensive collections of documents, photographs, films and other materials documenting the Korean intercountry adoption program and the existence and activities of Korean adoptees worldwide. It will form the basis for what he hopes will become the first archive and research center devoted to Korean adoption.

Hubinette and Kim, along with three other adoptee organizations in Korea, Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (GOAL), Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoption Community of Korea (TRACK) and Adoptee Solidarity Korea (ASK), are discussing how such an archive would be built with the input from all their organizations.



KoRoot's front yard. Photo by Stephen Wurrow

### MOSAİK: making connections in business

After being at KoRoot for a year, Kim observed that many of the adoptees choosing to live in Korea were working as teachers of their native languages. But he became concerned that there were not enough opportunities for adoptees interested in doing other kinds of work.

Heurbyeolnal Intercultural Business School of KoRoot (HIB-SOK) is a program to help adoptees find work at companies in Korea. In the beginning, Korean business leaders were invited to speak, and workshops on Korean business culture offered. The focus later shifted to helping people launch their own businesses.

The program has recently branched off from KoRoot with a new name. Multinational Opportunities Supporting Adoptee Initiatives Korea (MOSAİK), with a broader mission to connect adoptees, native Korean professionals and business people worldwide. The diverse group of core and affiliate members hails from Germany, Canada, France, Belgium and the United States.

The name represents "many different adoptees with different backgrounds coming together to form a whole," says Ben Hauser, one half of the team that leads MOSAİK. Hauser lived at KoRoot for two weeks upon coming to Korea in 2005 and became involved with the group later that year. "I thought it was a great opportunity to build a small community of business professionals, people interested in learning the ins and outs of starting a business in Korea. In 2005, I was active in the adoptee community and knew a lot of people who were teaching English, but there were also a lot

of people working in companies."

In 2006, the group began offering scholarships to pilot businesses, sponsoring two new businesses that year. Through that experience, Hauser said, the group members learned how to register for business licenses, set up a corporate bank account, and other business start-up activities.

Karin Roest was the recipient of the scholarship in 2007. She launched her own company, MKR Entertainment, which coordinated

local music events. "Starting my own business gave me the confidence to think I could really make a difference in Korea," Roest says. MKR has since evolved into a new venture, Audilution (Auditory revolution), which provides public relations and artist representation services for artists working in the music industry.

MOSAİK receives funding from KoRoot and the Seoul Metropolitan Government and holds monthly sessions on professional skills, leadership

development and networking. In the future, MOSAİK hopes to offer more scholarships, expand its network internationally and support more members who want to launch their own projects.

### New projects

Kim is currently working on the publication of another book that will contain articles written by himself and several adoptee writers. The book will be published in Korean in spring 2009, becoming only the fifth Korean-language book on the subject of adoption.

Kim wants to eventually publish a collection of essays on the subject.

For now, he will continue to organize events and work on getting the research center off the ground. Recently he is also researching Korea's adoption and civil laws in preparation for Korea's planned ratification of the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, an international treaty with 76 signatories that was ratified by the United States in 2007.

KoRoot will continue to be a space for adoptees, fostering community and nurturing adoptee initiatives, its doors always open to those whose journey to Korea leads them to cross its threshold. ●

*Jerry Na lives in South Korea, is part of KoRoot's adoptee advisory committee and is a founding member of Adoptee Solidarity Korea (ASK).*

*For more information about organizations featured in this article, please visit the following websites:*  
<http://www.koroot.org/>,  
<http://www.resiliencefilm.org/>,  
<http://www.tobiashubinette.se/>,  
<http://www.goal.or.kr/>,  
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