

North Korea and adoption

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Introduction: A problematic subject

Overseas adoption has since the end of the Korean War been closely related with South Korea, the country in the world that has sent away the largest number of children for adoption resulting in a population of 150,000 adopted Koreans in more than 20 Western countries. This way of solving post-war chaos, mass poverty and rapid industrialization has internationally rendered South Korea the designation of *koasuch'ulguk* or “the orphan exporting country”. North Korea has from the beginning and especially during the 1970s when the struggle for legitimacy was ruthlessly waged between the two countries, accused its southern neighbour of selling off Korean children as an outrageous example of “flunkeyism” toward the Western world.

After the war, North Korea was also forced to deal with the problem of orphaned children, but the country officially choose a different path than South Korea. Instead the orphaned children were designated as children of national heroes, and domestic adoption was encouraged, while model orphanages were built and exposed in the propaganda, and grant systems made it possible to receive higher education. However, today with the collapse of the North Korean economy tens of thousands of children have been orphaned and locked into poor institutions far away from a child welfare system worth the name. And recently, information has sipped out from the closed country that North Korean children as well were adopted by foreigners in the Communist world during the war. Using the various and scant sources that are available, this article is an attempt to map the practice of adoption in North Korea.

The official history of adoption in North Korea

North Korea or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, D.P.R.K., was set up with the support of the Russians in September of 1948 as opposed to the American-supported Republic of Korea or R.O.K. The main faction that was to take the lead in the young Communist state was composed of former guerrilla fighters from Manchuria around their legendary leader Kim Il Sung.¹ Two years later the North tried to overcome the division of the peninsula by initiating a full-scale war, which instead deepened the hostility between the two rivaling states even more.

According to reliable North Korean sources from Russian archives, the country's population declined from 9,368,592 in 1948 to 7,425,939 in 1953.² Obviously, mass emigration to South Korea,³ and the approximately 1 million civilian and military deaths in the Korean War, had made North Korea bleed white. The horrendous losses naturally resulted in thousands of parentless children as was the case for its southern neighbour. In 1954 the South Korean government started its overseas adoption program which would become the world's most successful in terms of numbers, and a cause of outrage for North Korea.⁴

Officially North Korea chose another way by elevating the children of deceased soldiers as "children of the revolutionaries" by creating special orphanages and schools to make it possible for the orphans to get an education and advance in the society.⁵ One story tells how Kim Il Sung embraced the orphans of deceased soldiers as his own children: "You are not orphans anymore. General Kim Il Sung takes care of you, he is your father."⁶ This way of taking care of orphans and brainwash them to become loyal citizens or "revolutionary fighters" has many parallels in the history of child abuse, the elite Janissaries in the army of the Ottoman empire being one example.⁷ Like many of his counterparts in politics, Kim Il Sung also liked to portray himself as a friend of the children,⁸ a typical dictator behaviour

which his son and successor Kim Jong Il has inherited and as he has even written several children's stories.⁹

As a result of this, child welfare in North Korea has meant a modern-style domestic adoption law,¹⁰ revised as late as in the 1990s,¹¹ and an open encouragement of its practice besides a general law on the nursing and upbringing of children passed in 1976.¹² This means that the state has the full responsibility of providing orphans a home in every province of the country where the children are fed, clothed and educated.

The English language propaganda magazine *Korea Today* contains many adoption success stories,¹³ for example the one on Ko Chang Jun who has adopted three children: "Our society is like a family in which people are helping and leading each other forward. I felt strongly about social morality, so I decided to do this...".¹⁴ Adoptive parents in North Korea are seen as "society heroes", and thus domestic adoption becomes a way of expressing traditional Confucian bloodline thinking on a Communist collective level of the "great family".¹⁵ Domestic adoption indeed seems to be very common in North Korea as even the present leader Kim Jong Il himself has adopted a daughter, Lee Nam-ok, who defected to South Korea in 1992 and started to speak out about her unusual adoption experience in 1998.¹⁶

Adoption politics between North and South Korea

South Korean adoption started off after the Korean War, continued during the 1960s and reached its heydays in the 1970s and 1980s. The 1970s saw a fierce battle for legitimacy being fought between the two Korean states by every means possible from written and spoken propaganda to an expensive championship in the establishment of embassies and assassination attempts.¹⁷ In consequence, the controversial issue of South Korean overseas adoption became a part of this propaganda war.

In the beginning of the 1970s, North Korea was openly accusing South Korea of selling Korean offspring for profit to Westerners as an appalling example of so called flunkeyism or *sadaejuûi*, the opposite attitude being of course self-reliance or *chujê*.¹⁸ *Pyongyang Times* wrote: “The traitors of South Korea, old hands at treacheries, are selling thousands, tens of thousands of children going ragged and hungry to foreign marauders under the name of 'adopted children'.”¹⁹ The highlighting of the issue led to panic-stricken temporary stops, overseas adoption was transformed to a something close to a state official secret, and from 1975 domestic adoption in South Korea was promoted.²⁰

Overseas adoption also engaged the pros and cons of the respective Korean states. The pro-North Korean organization Chongryun started to include “compatriots adopted overseas” when addressing their letters regarding Korean affairs,²¹ and the equally progressive magazine *Hanyang* published an angry attack on overseas adoption seen as a “crime”, “selling our own nationals to foreigners”, and as an “indignity against the nation”:

“Then for what purpose do these Westerners import Korean orphans? Western life is thoroughly ruled by such vices as exploitation, suppression, xenophobia, and egoism, and it cannot be possible that such people are adopting our orphans all the way across the ocean out of sympathy. Why would such people ever want to raise our orphans to become decent human beings? There cannot exist such a virtue in their society where the law of the jungle reigns. The only possible reason for their adopting our orphans would be money... For sure they will have to invest some money to raise these children until the latter turn into a productive labour force. Do not conquerors always train the natives according to the ways of the former so that the latter would be docile to any colonial exploitation by the former? For the same reason, Western parents would educate their Korean children to be good 'house slaves'. Considering this, how great would be the hardship of these adopted children!”²²

In the next decade, North Korean media continued to write about the plight of abandoned children in South Korea,²³ and in 1988 when Western media started to write on overseas adoption during the Olympic Games in Seoul, North Korea resumed its activity. The American magazine *The Progressive* opened up by publishing an investigative article in its January edition, which portrayed South Korea as a country dealing in the business of

children.²⁴ The article was immediately serialised in North Korean magazine *The People's Korea*,²⁵ and the negative attention which followed, created an image of South Korea as the world's leading orphan exporting country or *koasuch'ulguk*. Finally, in 1992 North Korea solemnly invited an adopted Korean from Germany to the World Youth Festival in Pyongyang as a way of showing ethnic Korean solidarity.²⁶

The unofficial story of adoption in today's North Korea

Since 1995, a combination of natural disasters, a growing isolation after the fall of Soviet Union and a wrecked planned economy has plunged North Korea into a famine of catastrophic dimensions.²⁷ It is estimated that 2 million people have starved to death, and 200,000 children have been orphaned.²⁸ Again the country has to deal with the problem of thousands of parentless children, and this time according emergency relief workers on place, the North Korean regime seems to have chosen to keep them locked into poorly equipped institutions to prevent further societal disruption.²⁹

Ironically, some of the relief organizations working in North Korea like Holt International and Children's Home Society,³⁰ are adoption agencies dealing with South Korean overseas adoption, and an educated guess says that some of them are eagerly waiting for the collapse of the North Korean system and an almost unlimited supply of adoptable children as South Korea is consciously diminishing its overseas adoption quotas annually. Moreover, some of the adult adopted South Koreans have been visiting North Korea either representing media or as relief workers,³¹ while several American officials dealing with North Korean issues like James Keat, first secretary of the U.S. embassy in Seoul, and William Perry, former U.S. Defence secretary and the man behind the *Perry Report* in 1999, are adoptive parents to South Korean children.³²

Already in the beginning of the 1990s, Kim Jong Il pledged the citizens of North Korea to adopt the country's orphaned children, and between January of 1992 to September of 1993 one source states that 1,060 domestic adoptions were proceeded.³³ In June of 2001 the South Korean media was able to reveal the hitherto unknown story of overseas North Korean adoption which took place in connection with the war. Already during the war, Western media sometimes wrote about children of female North Korean soldiers and guerrillas in the South who were cared for by U.N. troops,³⁴ but never had the exact scale of overseas adoption from North Korea been known before.

Between 1951-52, 2,500 North Koreans war orphans had been adopted to various Communist countries; as many as 1,500 to Ceaucescu's Romania and around 200 each to Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Mongolia and most probably China and Russia as well, and at the same period the Chinese government allowed more than 200,000 North Korean refugee children to attend Chinese schools in Manchuria.³⁵ With all this in mind, from now on North Korea must be considered technically disqualified to accuse South Korea for "exporting" children to foreign countries.

Further more, as the number of refugees from North Korea continue to increase, soon the adoption of North Korean children by South Koreans may be a reality itself. Parenthetically, ethnic Koreans from Manchuria have already started to arrive as adoptees to South Korea, albeit in very small numbers.³⁶ In January of 2002 two orphaned North Korean children from Manchuria who together with thousands of other parentless children have crossed the fragile Tumen river border in search for food, were provided asylum in South Korea, and in the debate that followed the American missionary Tim Peters stated in an interview: "I think adoption is an excellent solution. You might remember that many orphaned South Korean children were adopted by Western families after the Korean War. It is time for South Koreans to do the same."³⁷

Notes

¹ For a detailed background to the origins of the Northern system, see Bruce Cumings, *Origins of the Korean War. Liberation and the emergence of separate regimes 1945-47*, Princeton, 1981, and *Origins of the Korean War. The roaring of the cataract 1947-50*, Princeton, 1990.

² *New evidence on North Korean war losses* (2002-05-16): <http://cwihip.si.edu/press-korea.htm>

³ James A. Foley, "The ten million families': Statistic or metaphor?", *Korean Studies* 25:1 (2001), 96-110.

⁴ Helen Miller, "Korea's international children", *Lutheran Social Welfare*, Summer 1971, 12-23.

⁵ For example the Mangyongdae Revolutionary School, *The Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, Pyongyang, 1986, 173.

⁶ "As a mother of bereaved children", *Korea Today* 12/1083, 25.

⁷ Andrina Stiles, *The Ottoman empire 1450-1700*, London, 1989, 69-73.

⁸ See the pictures of Kim Il Sung among children in *Pyongyang*, Pyongyang, 1975, 122-29.

⁹ For example Kim Jong Il, *T'okkiûi p'altujaeng* [The rabbit's foot fight], Pyongyang, 1988.

¹⁰ Pukhan Yônguso, *Pukhan Kajokbôbgwa kajôngsilt'ae* [North Korean family law and the state of the family], Seoul, 1991.

¹¹ Chê-kyun Pak, "Pukhan sangsokjêdo puhwal" [Restoration of North Korea's succession system], *Dong-A Ilbo* 13/10 1991.

¹² Myong Bin Pak, *The patron of public health*, Pyongyang, 1991, 129-32.

¹³ For example Hyok Ju, "This is my son", *Korea Today* 11/1993, 27, Sok Nyo Han, "Adopt me as your daughter", *Korea Today* 3/1994, 23, and Gyong Hui Ryu, "Parental love", *Korea Today* 4/1994, 22.

¹⁴ Kyong Hui Ryu, "Of families – natural, adopted and national", *Korea Today* 1/1996, 31.

¹⁵ For theories on lingering Confucianism in North Korea, see Bruce Cumings, "The corporate state in North Korea", in Hagen Koo (ed.), *State and society in contemporary Korea*, Ithaca & London, 1993, 197-230, and Young Whan Kihl, "The cultural dimension and context of North Korean Communism", *Korean Studies* 18 (1994), 139-57.

¹⁶ "Kim Chông-il, chasik'kyoyukên k ûn kwansim" [Kim Jong Il is greatly interested in the upbringing of his family], *Kookmin Ilbo* 2/2 1998.

¹⁷ The struggle for legitimacy between North and South Korea has been dramatically outlined in Don Oberdorfer, *The two Koreas. A contemporary history*, Reading, 1997.

¹⁸ See for example “Nordkoreanska rykten hejdar svensk adoption” [North Korean rumours creates hinders for Swedish adoption], *Dagens Nyheter* 7/1 1971.

¹⁹ Cited by Robert Whyment in “Baby-snatching”, *The Guardian* 20/6 1973.

²⁰ Youn-Taek Tahk, ”Intercountry adoption program in Korea. Policy, law and service”, in René Hoksbergen (ed.), *Adoption in worldwide perspective. A review of programs, policies and legislation in 14 countries*, Berwyn and Lisse, 1986, 79-92.

²¹ ”Letter to political parties, public organizations and people of all strata in S. Korea and compatriots overseas adopted”, *The Monthly Korean Affairs* 17:4 (1977), 12-16.

²² Translated and cited by Changzoo Song in *The contending discourses of nationalism in post-colonial Korea and nationalism as an oppressive and anti-democratic force*, PhD-dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1999, 241-42.

²³ Sun Jik Kim, ”Mother’s sorrow”, *Korea Today* 8/1982, 85.

²⁴ Matthew Rothschild, “Babies for sale. South Koreans make them, Americans buy them”, *The Progressive* 52:1 (1988), 18-23.

²⁵ See *The People’s Korea* 20/2, 5/3 and 12/3 1988.

²⁶ “From orphan to merited scientist”, *Pyongyang Times* 4/4 1992.

²⁷ Nicholas Eberstadt, *The end of North Korea*, Washington D.C., 1999.

²⁸ InterAction, *Activity report North Korea*, Washington D.C., 2000.

²⁹ ”So hungry they eat human flesh”, *The Electric New Paper* 2/1 2001.

³⁰ Unsie Zuege, ”First things first. Local group to raise food aid for North Korean orphanage children”, *Korean Quarterly* 1:4 (1998), 13, and Alan Bachman, ”North Korean relief mission. A journey from the heart”, *Korean Quarterly* 4:3 (2001), 18.

³¹ The photographer Maria Olsson from Sweden visited North Korea in 1997 together with her Swedish husband Jon Thunqvist which resulted in the article ”En förbjuden promenad i Pyongyang” [A forbidden walk in Pyongyang], *Dagens Nyheter* 24/8 1997, and Thomas Park Clement has travelled to North Korea several times since 1999 with medical donations. See his story ”Leaving a legacy: Meeting ghosts and letting the sunshine in”, *TransCultured Magazine* 1:4 (1999), 8-9.

³² For Keat, see ”Love beyond national borders”, *Digital Chosun Ilbo* 11/5 1996, and for Perry, see In-chul Park, ”Adopted Korean children planning family reunion”, *Korea Newsreview* 3/4 1993, 9.

³³”Koanûrô ibyanggwônjang undong” [An increase of orphans. A movement to encourage adoption], *Kookmin Ilbo* 29/12 1993, and ”T’ongil kwannjang” [Unification Plaza], *Dong-A Ilbo* 9/2 1997.

³⁴ Jørgen Andersen-Rosendal, ”Nordkoreansk krigsfånge skrev tackbrev till svenske kungen” [A North Korean prisoner-of-war wrote a letter of appreciation to the Swedish king], *Stockholms-Tidningen* 28/1 1951.

³⁵ Hyôk-ch’ôl Kwôn, ”Yêt Soryôn Kunsagomundanjang 6.25 pogosô” [A report on former Soviet Union military advisory troops during the Korean War], *Hankyore* 26/6 2001.

³⁶ Ji-yông Kim, ”’10nyônch’i wôlgûb’ yuhokê Chosônjok yôsôngdûl ’hao” [Ten years’ monthly salaries temptation for Chinese-Korean women], *Wôlgan Chosôn* 7/1 2002.

³⁷ Chi-dong Lee, ”Two orphaned NK children seek new families in the South”, *Korea Times* 18/3 2002.

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