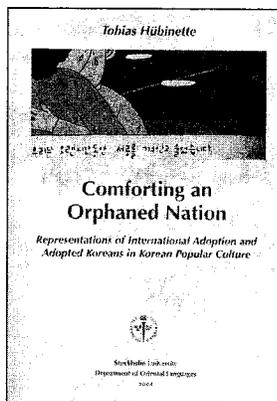


**RETROSPECTIVE
ON A GRAND
EXPERIMENT**

Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture

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It's a shame that Americans call Korea the largest exporter of toys, textiles, and babies. We should be ashamed of ourselves, and put a stop to this immediately... In Europe, in the United States, wherever I've been, I've see our children. I am ashamed. (Dae Jung Kim, *Asia Week*, April 6, 1990).

Now you must forget your difficult past and renew your relations with your native country in order to work together toward common goals based on the blood ties that cannot be severed even if we wanted to. (First Lady Hee-ho Lee at the First International Gathering of Adult Korean Adoptees, Washington, D.C., 1999)

Comforting an Orphaned Nation is a well-researched study of the popular cultural representations (defined by four movies and four songs) of international adoption and adopted Koreans in western countries. Tobias Hubinette's study is from a postcolonial perspective and makes an in-depth, serious exploration on how nationalism is expressed in modern Korean society. Hubinette addresses the principal issue: What are the implications for a nation that has sent away so many of its own children, and what are the reactions of that country when encountering and dealing with the adopted Koreans?

Hubinette constructs eight chapters to offer some answers to that long-simmering issue. After the introductory Chapter One, Chapter Two provides a history of international adoption from Korea. An appendix at the end of the book provides specific numbers of adoptees sent abroad. Chapter Three provides an account of the adoption issue in political discussion. Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven analyze the four representative movies and songs with adoption themes and their impact, and how Korea has reacted when encountering these adoption issues in popular culture.

one that continues to this day.

As Kristi Brian's ethnographic study (2004 dissertation) critically indicates, Korean international adoption system shifted from the problem-solving goals to a consumer-oriented approach, "draped in anti-racist and multiculturalist discourse, and heavily steeped in American paternalism and white entitlement." Another study by Dani Isaac Meier (1998) observes "how adopted Koreans are continuously negotiating their multiple and contradictory racial and ethnic subject positions."

Hubinette points to how the Korean adoptee community expresses its stand on adoption issues through the arts, including anthologies, novels, events, representational art, drama, and documentary films. Internet connections and other forms of adoptee awareness have created networks connecting Korean adoptees from country to country.

Post-Colonial Residue:

Hubinette's use of postcolonial theory relies less on territorial control and more on the "still existing relationship between the West and non-West in terms of economic, political, social, linguistic and cultural dependencia, domination and subordination, not mention the moral and ethical aspects."

As Hubinette observes, "...it cannot be coincidence that the countries supplying children for international adoption to the West, almost all fall under the American sphere of influence and have been exposed to American military intervention..."

Hubinette points to four forced migrations — slavery, indentured labor, women for prostitution, and international adoption. Only adoption has escaped condemnation, uncontested, and protected by legal sanctions in one form or another. Other similarities in these groups exist. For example, slaves and adoptees share the common factors of being separated from their parents or relatives, stripped of their original language and culture, reborn at the entry ports of the new land, re-baptized and made Christian, and given the names of their new family.

Korean Identity and Nationalism:

At its core, Korean nationalism emphasizes the unique racial group and lineage of Korea (5,000 years worth), along with territorial, linguistic and cultural continuity. Extreme sexism, patriarchy, and Confucianism have helped perpetuate an attitude

against displaced persons, or what that tradition would view as impure groups. The imposition of nearly 50 years of Japanese colonialism with its programmatic purge of Korean culture, and the turmoil and displacement of the Korean War all helped perpetrate this tradition. The massive foreign military presence, resulting in a brutal national transition into the modern world "naturally made the Koreans suspicious of, or even hostile to, all things foreign."

There is only one Korean nationalism, but there several different nation states, political groupings, and diasporic communities. While Koreans, north and south of the DMZ, have recently acknowledged family ties, this trend has received less attention with respect to Koreans in other countries, such as Russia, Manchuria, China, and Japan. Overseas Koreans in Hawaii, North and South America, refugees of the Japanese occupation or of civil war, had to be eventually recognized. Korean adoptees, until recent years, were used selectively as persona non grata, ignored for political reasons or national embarrassment.

Confucian ideology, so entrenched in Korean culture, determined adoption practices long ago. There was always adoption within Korean culture, but it was severely restricted within the culture's particular idea of family. The three main factors were that the adopted child be male, had to be a relative (ideally a nephew), and come from one generation below the adopting father. This didn't leave much room for orphaned girls or boys with no verifiable clan or blood ties. Adoption was accomplished so that the estate of a family could descend from father to son, or adopted son, through the male line.

International adoption existed in an acceptable and limited way soon after the Korean War and again after the Vietnam War, when half-Korean children were thought to be better off in the father's country, since they stood no chance of a normal life as half-Koreans and children of a single mother in Korea.

Adoption Ideology and Practice: The statistics show how cruel the Korean War was to children in general. In 1951, the United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency estimated about 100,000 orphaned children. In 1953, there were some 293,000 widowed women caring for 516,000 children under age 13 (Korean Red Cross, 1977). In 1954, the International Union for

Child Welfare counted nearly two million children under age 18 out of five million refugees, who had been displaced by war. Some 10,000 orphans lived on the streets.

Children of foreign soldiers and native women were shunned, as were their mothers, by Korean society. Most countries claimed the mixed children to their countries, and Korean wives were accepted as war brides. A mass migration was to America and to the participating European countries that fought in the war.

The absence of a legal framework in Korea for the welfare of displaced children created some concern among Korean officials. The social chaos of the post-war years created a vacuum that was soon filled by international child welfare agencies, adoption agencies, missionaries and church organizations from the West. Well-intentioned individuals such as American Harry Holt arrived with money, clout, new ideas, and organizational skills to take over and control the placement of thousands of Korean children.

There was initially some relief that the war orphans, including mixed-blood children, and physically handicapped children, were sent overseas. Soon, the overseas adoption mechanism was also exporting full-Korean babies and children. The greatest numbers of Korean adoptees went to America, later to Scandinavia, and later still to other locations in Europe. From 1953 to 2004, some 156,000 Korean adoptees were sent abroad. Other figures show a number closer to 200,000, calculating in private and illegal adoptions.

In the early years of overseas adoption, the practice was justified with the explanation that there was no social infrastructure to support the thousands of displaced (and unwanted) children within the country. As adoption agencies became more efficient, parents were encouraged, directly or indirectly, to give up their children to a better life in the West. By the 1980s, adoption agencies had their own delivery clinics, baby reception centers, and maternity shelters for young, single and unwed mothers. This secured a supply of healthy babies for adoption.

The supply of babies and children did not diminish. As the Korean industrialization took hold, an internal migration from the rural to urban settings resulted in

unwanted pregnancies. Single motherhood was a social stigma to modern times in Korea. Abortion was also uncommonly high during the industrial period.

Shifts in Policy:

The post-industrial boom of the 1980s put Korea on the map. Student demonstrations, union strikes and populist protests built pressure for democratization. Somehow, the attention of the international press during the 1988 Olympics in Seoul became focused on Korea's international adoptions, and how Korea sent the most children overseas of any country.

The overwhelming criticism and humiliation in the wake of this media attention led to a suspension of overseas adoptions. In 1989, new guidelines for adoption were issued, with the aim of reducing overseas adoptions, and ending it by 1996 (excluding adoptions of mixed-race children and the handicapped). In August 1994, close to the 1996 deadline, the deadline was extended to 2015. The reasoning was that domestic adoptions remained too low.

On a political platform, adopted Koreans were perfect to exploit as international goodwill ambassadors or the victimized objects of poverty, war, even anti-Americanism. Even North Korea has used the adoption issue against South Korea. With media exposure and democratization, adopted Koreans, many of whom were now adults in countries around the world were speaking with their own voices. Korea had to respond. As Hubinette points out, the populist media of movies and music were ideal platforms to politicized and raise debate over the adoption issues.

Redressing Adoption Issues from the Populist Front:

The author's examples of how adoption issues are portrayed in Korean popular culture all came from within Korea. This was not random. The rise of the Korean middle class has meant, along with an interest in globalization and democracy, a greater focus on popular media, particularly films and music.

Reunification became a powerful symbol in the '90s, and the idea encompassed ethnic Koreans around the world, inside and outside of the Korean peninsula. Then-president Dae Jung Kim appealed for the common bonds of Korean overseas, including adoptees, to connect to the homeland. As a heartfelt appeal of forgiveness, his

appeal was for unity and healing. Politically, it was the way to close the resentful chasm between Korea and the overseas Koreans and adoptees. It added to economic and global clout to have Korean voices and resources around the globe.

The 1980s and 1990s showed more open expression in Korean society by the mainstream movies and music that explored or exploited Korean adoptees. In itself, the adoption issue may not stand alone in Korean society. However, the interplay of adoption, Korean social values, post-colonialism, modern economy and gender can all be brought into the spotlight. The medium of popular music has similar aims.

Korean cinema took on social realism, *minjung* in the 1980s and 1990s. Movies, television, music, art and literature were re-examining the Korean identity. Included in this were serious looks at adoption issues. In an extreme moment, a cinema project, *American Dream*, was killed before production ever, started after stiff protests from the U.S. Embassy and adoption agencies. The story centered on an American couple adopting a Korean for the sole purpose of harvesting organs for their biological child.

From an exploitive or emotional position, Korean cinema was generating anti-American *minjung* as well as *han*, the collective suffering of Koreans having experienced separation and loss by foreign invasions, colonialism, war, and social upheavals. Pent-up feelings of sorrow and anger were added with shame and guilt when overseas adoption was thrown into the cultural mix. Hubinette's representative samples show no positive resolution on adoption.

Chapter Four, *The Nation is a Woman*, examines sex and gender with adoption. As a modern society, Korea nationalism is still gender based. Confucianism is patriarchal.

In 1991, Korean cinema produced the social drama, Susanne Brink's *Arirang*, in which the central character was a real overseas adoptee. The film by Kil-su Chang was well-received, even as it depicted the problems of overseas adoption by a Swedish couple.

Following the film, documentaries were made on the status of the real Susanne, then a single mother and student living in Uppsala, Sweden. Her life was unhappy and abusive.

She ran away numerous times, finally leaving home for good at age 16. This added to the fuel on the negative of Korean adoption, that international adoption is merely a way of selling Korean children to abusive and racists Westerners to furnish them with domestic servants, or even worse, for sexual exploitation or sources of organ transplants.

This harsh rhetoric would not go away after Chang's and other films had come and gone, particularly after the revelation that a few adoptees, such as Susanne Brink, really did suffer these various traumas at the hands of adoptive families.

The film about Brink ends with some personal Korean reconnection, a sense of her Korean nationalism realized by meeting Koreans in Sweden, but as the end credits roll by, pictures of nameless Korean babies are shown, clearly accusing the country of continuing in an adoption practices that can produce results like the case of Suzanne Brinks.

Chapter Five, *Beyond Koreanness and Whiteness* provides studies that go past the dichotomous lines of white/non-white, male/female, and hetero/homo. In the new social arena, social outcasts, overseas adoptees, mixed race people break away from set social confines in Korea or the Western white countries. The term hybridity pops up in social studies, sub- and counter-cultural scenes. As the movement grows, the terms expands to the notion or nation of hybridity.

Moon Hee Jun, a Korean musician, in 2001 released an album, *Alone*. The songs addressed alienation of dysfunctional families and children left as orphans. The title song depicts an adopted Korean in a Western country, alone and longing for the Korean mother. In an interview, Moon (not an adoptee) stated clearly that "overseas adoptees live miserable lives."

A provocateur, Moon's album cover shows him as a white-haired, gender-ambiguous person, holding a sleeping white child. The message/image is clear. He has flipped the established Western and non-Western social structure; the Korean single adoptive father/mother is caring for a Western white adopted child.

Around this time, filmmaker Kilduk Kim takes a similar hard swipe on societal perceptions of adoption in *Wild Animals*. This film deals

with Laura, an adopted Korean in Paris, France. Again, overseas adoption and its consequences are negatively portrayed. Born in Korea, adopted to France, and raised European, Laura's self-image is that of a white French woman. Meetings with other ethnic Koreans, northern and southern, and a Hungarian Corinne, Laura struggles with her identity. Korean nationalism and gender is thrown out the window, as Laura rejects a Korean suitor and works in a sex parlor for her French boyfriend.

Laura's character rejects the Koreanness and seeks the whiteness, even if she becomes an "oriental" fantasy to her western boyfriend. With neither Koreanness or whiteness in her possession, she is in an empty third space. Unlike Moon's images of a new order, Laura is left in a void.

Chapter Six, *The Separated Family* explores broken familial ties. There are two Korean family separations: The division of families ripped apart by war and creation of a north and south, and the families with blood ties between the two countries ranging in the thousands are still around today.

The ignored other separation is the exporting of ethnic Korean children overseas. In 1991, the Korean band *Clon* invited adopted Koreans visiting Korea to a free concert. The song *Abandoned Child* became the seminal song of overseas adoptees. It expressed the pain and sorrow of an adoptee, growing up in a Western country, feeling different and alone, and longing for Korea. The song continues with the adoptee returning to Korea hoping to find his mother. Uprooted native and ethnic Koreans also embraced *Abandoned Child*. The themes of separation and loss, and identity confusion hit home for many different groups of Koreans.

For Korean nationals, who inhabit their divided country, and Koreans overseas, immigrant or adopted, there is a shared common sense of separation and loss, and the desire for unity, reunification (for Koreans) and reconciliation (for adoptees).

Kwang-su Park's *Berlin Report* deals with adopted and ethnic Koreans in Germany. This film points to the healing and reunification of displaced Koreans, but in no easy manner. Pain and guilt are real. The film discusses the importance of obtaining recognition for German Koreans, who have been "forgotten, marginal-

ized, or made invisible" but are now making their presence heard.

Korean Adoptee Recognition:

1999 was a productive year for Korean adoptees, as with the following years 2000 to 2005. Larger groups visited Korea, with the help of corporate sponsorships and official Korean government acknowledgement. Politically, it was an opportunity for Korea to recognize all Koreans overseas, and to acknowledge that adopted Koreans were still Korean by birth and heritage, and by the sheer desire to return to search for their identity and roots.

Chapter Seven, *Envisioning a Global Koreatown*. If there was a notion in Korea that the diasporic Koreans still harbored a desire to return to the homeland, and that they maintained some collective Korean identity, it is quickly fading or changing. Overseas Koreans marry people in their host country. Their children are part Korean, and speak little or no Korean. New diasporic studies show these groups, especially adoptees, make lifelong personal and professional commitments to their host countries by choice. This cultural shift works against the Korean ideal of all Koreans connected to their homeland.

For overseas Korean adoptees, the emergence of a community of peers has occurred through technology, globalization, education and travel, calling into being a virtual orphaned nation. The new commonality is adoption issues, not Korean culture or language (or lack thereof).

The value of overseas adoptees and ethnic Koreans is not lost on Korea. New government agencies, such as the Overseas Korean Foundation (1997) were established to deal with the dispersed Korean brethren (*chaeye tongp'o*) officially classified as human resources and national assets. As the new millennium began, Korea saw that it was politically wise to recognize and reconnect to Koreans across the globe, as Korea itself was expanding globally for political and economic reasons.

By the 1990s, overseas and adopted Koreans were frequently in the media and popular culture. In 2004, the first Gathering for adopted Korean adults was held in Seoul, Korea. A second Korean adoptee gathering is expected in the coming years. The rise of a Korean transnationalism as the vehicle to tie ethnic and adopted Koreans is becoming the new vehicle for reconciliation.

The view in Korea concerning international adoption issues is softening a bit. Reconnecting, healing, and reconciliation are becoming the words of the day. The 1999 Korean film, *Love* deals with native and American Koreans, ethnic and adopted. The story also moves from Korean soil to the Los Angeles Koreatown. The Korean male and adopted female characters become metaphors of Koreanness and globalization, the reconciliation and reunification of all Koreans.

In his summary in Chapter Eight Tobias Hubinette sums up with his statement: *The unpleasant and uncomfortable feelings of guilt and culpability for having sold its own children, together with a somewhat understandable but desperate desire to disavow and cover up Korean complicity and responsibility, also create a permanent state of anxiety and uneasiness and an unfulfilled sense of incompleteness for never being able to forget that Korea is still and will perhaps always be the uncontested global supplier of international adoptees in modern history.* He goes on to say that to appease the guilt, to reach forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation, the international adoptions must stop.

The title, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation*, applies to the Korean adoptees scattered across the globe since the end of the Korean War, and the continued 2,500 orphans per year still being adopted from Korea. It can also apply to South Korea, a modern industrialized nation of educated people, a country which has yet to face up to its shameful practices.

Adoption in itself as a redeeming cultural practice or as a legal practice is globally accepted and as old as mankind. Eastern cultures used adoption as a means of keeping familiar bonds. Where it deviates is in later times with the Western notion of non-familial adoptions, the custom of stranger adoption, breaking all connections between child and blood family, and changing the personal and racial identity of the adoptee. This practice is a key element in the problematic issues of modern Korean adoption history.

Comforting an Orphaned Nation provides sobering observations, explores mature themes long ignored, suppressed, or muted, and bluntly and seriously presents the unresolved adoption issues. This is an original work, and the first of its kind. It should open the way to more books of this nature, generate constructive criticism, change government policies, stop the exportation

of innocent children, and force Korea to own up to its adoption history.

Even in acknowledgement, there is the overwhelming sense of dishonor and shame, guilt and regret from Korea, U.S. and the adoption institutions, and anger and disenfranchisement from the adoptees. All of that must be resolved before there is any sense of forgiveness and healing.

No social reconciliation of this magnitude can begin without a fully and truthful understanding, something we Korean adoptees have never received. This is our Korean reunification. Reconciliation cannot come without acknowledgement from Korea itself.

But, as Hubinette observes, the experiences of separation and loss, pain and suffering, the desire for reunification for a country and for adoptees mirror each other. With such deeply rooted and shared experiences, Korea as a nation can initiate a reconciliatory process, spiritually heal and reunify the country, and build new, global communities.

Kristi Brian (2004) concludes in her study that the "adopted Koreans themselves as members of a growing transnational activist movement questioning international adoption as taking part 'in the best interest of the child,' will be the ones that are potentially the most well situated and positioned to activate and galvanize reforms and institutional changes for the future."

Tobias Hubinette's book is a definitive first-of-its-kind work, highly critical, and likely to ignite controversy. The book is currently a Ph.D. dissertation, but deserves to get proper publication and distribution in due course. Hubinette, a familiar name among the European KAs as an activist and writer, is involved with the Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (GOAL) and the Korean Adoptee-Adoptive Family Network (KAAN), has made significant contributions prior to this research on Korean adoption issues. He is a brave writer to fully address the controversies behind Korean adoption.

This is an inspired work in so many ways. If and when it hits the mainstream, there will be a lot of protests and criticisms. It should be read by Korean adoptees, Korean Americans, Korean nationals, government officials and international adoption professionals, and anyone involved in trans-racial adoption.

For information on how to download or order a copy, contact Tobias at: tobias@orient.su.se