

BOOK REVIEWS

Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture. By Tobias Hübinette. Seoul: Jimoondang, 2006, 274 pages. (ISBN: 978-8988095959)

Some 8% of all ethnic Koreans are living abroad (Chapter 8), further establishing Korean Diaspora and migration studies as its own area of research. However, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1990s, South Korea has silently placed more children up for international adoption than any other country in the world. Astonishingly enough, Korean adoption studies per se has only been recently recognized among the voluminous literature of Korean Diaspora studies despite the fact that almost one third of all worldwide international adoptees are estimated to be Korean and over 150,000 children have been adopted overseas since the Korean war (Chapter 3). Hübinette's book on overseas adopted Koreans makes a significant contribution to this burgeoning field, in that his work certainly represents a pioneering analysis, while remaining one of the most influential studies on critical Korean adoption issues.

As the book discusses in great depth in Chapter 1, previous studies were either conducted by Korean researchers who mostly focused on child welfare services and legal issues, or by western scholars and social workers who largely focused on the physical and mental health of Korean adoptees. The latter researchers were often adoptive parents or adoption professionals, and as such they often ignored the issue of race. Thus, a forthcoming study by Hübinette, a Korean-Swedish adoptee himself, is both rare and refreshing, offering new perspectives and insights on the Korean Diaspora, the social history of South Korea, and forced migration studies in general.

More importantly, his book grants Korean adoptees a rare opportunity to speak out for themselves. Ironically, although Korean adoptees are undoubtedly the most affected by international adoptions, they rarely have a voice in this highly

economic and political process that is much too often dominated by governments, adoption brokers, and western adoptive parents that are willing to pay for preferably 'cute' Asian children (as is the case for the Angelina Jolies, Mia Farrow, and Madonnas who adopt transracial children without realizing they are stimulating a baby-exporting industry in often poor and corrupt countries). In the case of South Korea, international adoptions reached a historical peak in the 1980s, generating about 15 to 20 million dollars per year for South Korea's economy (Chapter 3).

Critical and previously ignored voices from researchers like Tobias Hübinette are certainly necessary in order to change Korean society and oppose the strong international adoption lobby. As an example of this, keep in mind the fact that South Korea is still sending about 1,000 children every year abroad via adoption despite the fact that it has been an OECD member for over a decade, a leading economy, and has the lowest birth rate in the world. South Korea is also one of the few remaining countries on earth that has not ratified the "Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption", which regulates adoption procedures and protects the best interests of the child, despite (and perhaps exactly because of) being among the main suppliers of babies. All this is more than merely suggestive of a strong international adoption lobby and a catastrophically underdeveloped social welfare system. Hübinette's break with research taboos and his radical critique of past and present adoption practices is more than welcome.

However, despite his undoubtedly valuable contribution to Korean adoption studies, I have two major concerns. The first is methodological while the other is structural.

As the subtitle indicates, his study on the "representations of international adoption and adopted Koreans in Korean popular culture" seems to be a media analysis. However, in the first chapters, Hübinette focuses on adoption issues, social and historical aspects, legislation, underlying factors in Korean society and the west, the legacy of president Kim Dae Jung for Korean adoptees, and the role of Holt, the largest adoption agency in Korea, wherein Hübinette claims that "without the activities of Holt, international adoption from Korea would never have developed into such gigantic dimensions as it did." (Chapter 2). Obviously, the first chapters clearly opt for a historical approach by addressing legal, social, economic, and migration issues. This is interesting enough, as such a complex, macrohistorical analysis has never been made and hence vastly enriches the literature. The author would have been better served to continue in this manner. However, in the latter chapters of the book, Hübinette suddenly presents a media analysis, which I argue, could have been understood even without reading the previous chapters. I wonder why the author did not write two research mono-

graphs, one that expounded upon the Korean adoption issue from a socio-historical perspective, and a second that analyzed adoptees represented in the media (after giving a brief introduction of selected relevant adoption issues). As the author admits himself, such a media analysis has never been conducted, which makes me feel it was too ambitious to present two major analyses as one publication. Undoubtedly, this led to a slight structural break in the middle of the book.

Second and more importantly, whereas I somewhat agree with the author's postcolonial approach that defines Korean adoptees as manifestations of a (culturally and socially) orphaned nation that has been largely dependent on and influenced by the USA after its liberation, I think that the author tends to over-contextualize. Monocausally, Hübinette relates international adoptions to the plight of comfort women under Japanese rule, historical slavery, women trafficking, and female marriage migrants. I do agree with his point that in society, and certainly in Korean society, females and children have historically been sacrificed and silenced to pay the price for the nation. However, I wonder if these issues should necessarily be employed here as they distract from the issue of Korean adoption per se. In discussing these highly sensitive issues, the tone of the book also becomes anti-American (or anti-"imperialist" as Hübinette states himself). I daresay that the book, otherwise written excellently, would have been more credible if it presented more suggestions instead of mere interpretations. Another criticism I have is that in opting for a postcolonial approach, the author tends to discuss overseas adoptions from a pull-factor or demand-driven perspective, notably the role of adoption agencies discarding minimum standards, adoptive parents driven by religious fundamentalism, commercial adoption brokers, the role of American soldiers, the high demand for children in the west attributed to birth control and legalized abortions, and politically left-liberal western governments facilitating adoptions. Admittedly, whereas the high demand for healthy children in the west has certainly fuelled and facilitated adoptions from South Korea, Hübinette does not really critically discuss the push-factor aspect, such as the catastrophically underdeveloped social welfare system in South Korea (still one of the lowest expenditures in the OECD), the large economic and social burden of unwed mothers, the poor level of sexual education, and extreme patriarchy as the major causes that propagate adoptions. His study would have been more balanced if it also rigorously discussed the corresponding supply side (i.e. South Korea's 'guilt' in the whole process) in the same critical manner as he is judging the west and their adoption brokers. Such a discussion would have made the book more credible as an overall critique of child-trade and forced migration rather than as an anti-"imperialist" study.

In summary, although I do have some structural and methodological problems with this book, I do recommend it without hesitation. Hübinette's book greatly contributes to the study of the Korean Diaspora and migration, the social history of South Korea, and Korean adoption, and it might even have helped lay a foundation for the development of the latter.

Note that a Korean translation of the book is published by Sonamoo (see www.sonamobook.co.kr).

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