

The adopted Koreans of Sweden and the Korean adoption issue

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The paper looks at Korea as the country which has sent away the largest number of its citizens for international adoption in modern times, and Sweden which harbours the highest proportion of international adoptees in the world. The focus is on the adopted Koreans of Sweden, their role in the development of the Korean adoption issue and how they are perceived as a physical bond between the two countries. Furthermore, the adopted Koreans are also turning up in Korean popular culture, and play a part in present day's diaspora politics and the construction of a nationalism embracing all ethnic Koreans.

Keywords: international adoption, adopted Koreans, nationalism, diaspora

Introduction

Since the end of the 1980s, the adoption issue, or *ibyang munje*, has been a part of the public discussion in Korea, the country that has sent away the largest number of children for international adoption in modern history. During a period of half a century, 150,000 overseas children have been sent to 20 different Western countries. Among them, Sweden has been one of the main receiving countries, and is a mirror image of Korea in that it has adopted the largest number of children.

The 9,000 adopted Koreans of Sweden have played an important role in highlighting the adoption issue in Korea. In 1976, president Park Chung-hee invited the adopted Koreans living in Scandinavia to a motherland tour, which became the first official recognition of the existence of the adopted Koreans. In 1989, the future president Kim Dae-

jung met with Lena Kim, an adopted Korean woman in Stockholm, and was so moved by her fate that he committed himself to the adoption issue as a politician. In 1991, the movie *Susanne Brink's Arirang*, the story of an adopted Korean woman living in Sweden, was screened for a wide audience at Korean cinemas and firmly established the adoption issue among the general public.

With the background of Sweden as the leading receiving country and Korea as the leading supplying country in the field of international adoption, this article is trying to examine the role of the adopted Koreans of Sweden in the development of the adoption issue in Korea and how the adopted Koreans are perceived as forming a physical bond between the two countries.

Sweden as the world's leading adopting country

Sweden has an international adoption history going back to the end of the 1930s when 500 Jewish refugee children from Germany were taken into Swedish families as foster children, of whom many were later adopted (Lomfors 1996). Moreover, between the war years of 1939-45, 70,000 children were temporarily moved to Sweden from Finland, of whom approximately 10,000 stayed permanently as foster children or adoptees (Kavén 1994). Finally, immediately after the war, 500 abandoned children from Germany were relocated to Sweden for adoption. Some of them were Jews from Eastern Europe who had survived the concentration camps, others were children of Norwegian mothers and German fathers, the products of the Nazi *Lebensborn* breeding program, who otherwise would have faced severe discrimination in a newly liberated Norway (Lindner 1988: 133-41).¹

This more or less one-way trafficking of children is understandable as Sweden is a formidable 20th century success story in terms of economic development and social modernity. In the 1860s, during the last famine in the northern part of Sweden, some children left the country

1. The Lebensborn program was created in 1935 by Nazi Germany with the purpose of creating a "super-race" by letting "racially pure" women and men meet and have children.

for adoption to neighbouring Norway, but since then very few adoptions of Swedish children have been allowed to foreigners, mainly to Swedish-Americans (Nordlof 2001: 76-77).

International adoption in its commonly used meaning, the adoption of non-White children from Third World countries to White adoptive parents in Western countries, was initiated after WWII as a way of rescuing biracial children fathered by American servicemen in China and Japan from social stigmatisation (Quinn 1961). However, it was not until after the Korean War that international adoption became wide scale.

Sweden participated in the war on the South Korean side with a field hospital located in Pusan, the Swedish Red Cross Hospital. It was among its medical staff, together with the missionaries that followed, and Swedish officers of the Neutral Nations' Supervisory Committee stationed in Panmunjöm after the armistice, that the first adoptive parents were to be found. In 1951 a female North Korean guerrilla fighter assigned her new-born daughter to a Swedish nurse at the hospital, an "adoption" that received media attention and later turned out to be a sponsored child relationship. The first Korean child who was legally adopted arrived in Sweden in 1957, and from then on, international adoption took off in the country.

The Swedish Statistical Central Bureau (SCB) has identified 48,789 international adoptees in Sweden born between 1932-2000 and coming from more than 130 countries, including the above-mentioned Jewish, Finnish and German children (SCB 2000). The international adoptees, again according to SCB, represent 1-1.5 percent of all generations born from the beginning of the 1970s, and still almost a thousand children arrive annually to Sweden.

The statistics mean that Sweden is, together with the other two Scandinavian welfare states Norway and Denmark, the country with the highest proportion of international adoptees per capita (Selman 2000). Parenthetically, in the U.S. Scandinavian-Americans are remarkably dominating international adoption as well, and naturally also adoption from Korea as it is estimated that 15 percent of the 100,000 adopted Koreans in the country have been placed in the state of Minnesota.

Korea has supplied almost one fifth of all international adoptions to

Sweden, resulting in an adopted Korean population of Sweden close to 9,000 individuals. Further on, adopted Koreans constitute the largest single East Asian population group in Sweden. Together with 8,000 adopted Koreans in Denmark and 6,000 in Norway, the adopted Koreans of Sweden almost solely make up the ethnic Korean presence in Scandinavia as there are barely a thousand immigrants from Korea living in the region.

There are various reasons for this strong Swedish and Scandinavian dominance of international adoption. Madeleine Kats, the ideologist behind the Swedish adoption movement during its first years, has pointed out that Swedes discovered the miseries of the Third World in the 1960s while travelling and almost felt an obligation to save children from poor backgrounds (Kats 1975: 41-43).

Another less idealistic motive worth mentioning was the sudden disappearance of adoptable Swedish children during the decade as a result of rapid economic growth and a high participation of women in the labour force, as well as the development of an advanced social welfare system. Even more important is Sweden's self image as the world's most democratic country and a paradise for human rights, equality and social justice, an image which recently has been challenged by the sudden appearance of racism towards non-Western immigrants (Pred 2000).

International adoption from Korea

The practice of international adoption started off spontaneously during the Korean War when orphans were taken care of at military bases by U.N. soldiers siding with the South. Some of those children who later were adopted primarily to the U.S. have written autobiographies about their experiences (Anthony 1960 and White 1995). It was also during the years of war that the first Western-style orphanages were set up, an absolute condition for the subsequent mass migration of Korean children.

In 1945 when Korea was divided, according to Helen Miller (1971) there were just 38 child welfare institutions in the country inhabited by less than 3,000 children. At the outbreak of the war in 1950, after repa-

triation from Japan and Manchuria and refugee movements from the North to the South, those numbers had increased to 215 institutions and almost 25,000 children. Finally in post-war South Korea of 1957, four years after the armistice, there were 482 institutions and close to 50,000 children from an estimated total of 100,000 orphans in the country.

In 1954, president Rhee Syngman set up the Child Placement Service with the specific aim of getting rid of the embarrassing presence of thousands of bi-racial children who were the products of Western military engagement (Tahk 1986: 79-92). Two years later, the American farmer Harry Holt, driven by his Christian fundamentalist zeal to rescue those bi-racial children prophetically conceived as the “seed from the East” (*Isaiah* 43:5), founded the Holt adoption agency, which still bears his name (Holt 1992). The agency has developed not only in Korea but throughout the world, dominating the field of international adoption and relocating more than 100,000 children to date, including half of the adoptions from Korea. During the 1950s, 3,000 children, most of them bi-racial, left Korea for adoption with the U.S. as the main country of destination.

In 1961, a special adoption law was passed creating a logistical framework for the most effective adoption industry unsurpassed in the world (Chõng & An 1994: 8). In the 1960s and 1970s when the mission to cleanse the country from bi-racial children was considered completed, international adoption found its new supply among the tens of thousands of Korean children abandoned in the brutal turmoil of urbanization and industrialization. In total, more than 50,000 Korean children were sent away to North American and Western European countries during those two decades, most of which had taken part on the Southern side in the war.

During the following decade and the tenure of president Chun Doo-hwan, international adoption continued in even larger numbers, with almost 70,000 children consisting primarily of those born out of wedlock. In 1985-86 the numbers peaked with close to 9,000 children a year being sent abroad for adoption. Worth noting is the fact that the middle of the 1980s were also the years which showed the highest emigration movement from Korea to almost the same Western countries affected by adoption.

In 1988, the year of the summer Olympics in Seoul, Western journalists highlighted Korea's adoption program as an outright trade in human beings and the country became known in the world as *koasuch 'ulguk*, or the orphan exporting country (Rothschild 1988). Before 1988, adoption had almost been treated as a state secret, mainly because of the accusation from North Korea that the southern neighbour was selling off its own children. Since 1988, desperate attempts have been made either to stop international adoption completely, or to decrease the numbers annually in favour of domestic adoption, and as a result of these efforts only 20,000 children were adopted overseas during the 1990s. Nevertheless, still, every year, around 2,500 children leave the country for adoption.

With a population of 150,000 adopted Koreans world-wide, 100,000 are living in the U.S. consisting of one third of all internationally adopted children and ten percent of the total ethnic Korean population in that country, 45,000 in Europe again representing an estimated one third of all international adoptees and half of the ethnic Koreans on the continent, and close to 5,000 altogether in Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Lovelock 2000). Actually, no other country in the world has sent away so many children overseas in modern times. Out of a crude estimate of 450,000 international adoptions globally since 1945, Korea alone constitutes one third (Selman 2000).

Korean research on international adoption has focused on traditional Confucian blood thinking and the short-comings of creating a social welfare state as the main reasons behind Korea being the leading adoption country in the world (Bai 1997 and Chh' oe 1993). The subject of international adoption is treated as a national trauma, and as a source of shame and humiliation for a nation that is striving for international recognition as a developed country, while scholarly attention is being given on how to increase and promote domestic adoption from a legislative point of view (Kim Hu-yŏng 1996).

A physical relationship between Sweden and Korea

Over the years, adopted Koreans have surfaced in the relationship between Sweden and Korea. International adoption became an issue in

the 1970s as part of the propaganda war waged between the two Koreas. North Korea accused South Korea of selling children to Westerners as an appalling example of so called 'flunkeyism.' In 1976, president Park answered by graciously inviting the 20,000 adopted Koreans living in Scandinavia to a motherland tour. As the overwhelming majority of the adoptees were still infants or small children at the time, this symbolic invitation led to nothing more than the first official recognition of the existence of the adopted Koreans.

Recognition has always been the case for official exchange between Sweden and Korea. Every time a Swedish ambassador in Korea appears in the media, the 9,000 adopted Koreans are mentioned as a unique physical bond created between the two countries. In 1975 ambassador Bengt Odevall, quoted in *Korea Newsreview* (18/10 1975), said: "The adoption program is one of the most successful undertakings between our two countries...I might say the relations between us can be likened to a blood-bonded one in consideration of the successful adoption program."

The bond created between the two countries was also the theme when president Kim Dae Jung as a Nobel Peace Prize laureate visited Sweden and prime minister Goran Persson in December of 2000 as both potentates mentioned the same physical relationship in their respective speeches and in addition to that, a special meeting was arranged between the Korean First Lady and a group of adopted Koreans.

In another interview from *The Korea Times* (6/3 2000), ambassador Sture Stiernlof portrays the now adult adopted Koreans as children of the Swedish elite: "They are usually successful and well integrated into Swedish society as they are often brought up in ambitious families. Members of the Swedish government, including the former defence minister, have adopted children from Korea while my cousin has two Korean children". This fact has meant that friendship between associations and nationals of Sweden and Korea, often composed of elite members of the two societies, also uses the adopted Koreans as a symbol of their close relationship.

The adopted Koreans of Sweden have left their marks in other various fields. Two comparative studies on dental health of adopted Koreans in Sweden and Koreans in Korea have been published (Chŏng

1997 and Matsson, Sjödin & Blomquist 1997), and an adopted Korean girl called Linnea stars in a highly popular Swedish children's book, also translated into Korean (Anderson & Björk 1978). Sweden is also the eternal role model when mourning the fact that Korea is the O.E.C.D. country spending the least on social welfare, and the Korean media is painfully aware of the fact that a negative image of Korea in Scandinavia has been influenced by the heavy adoption statistics.

Finally, in the media, when Korean journalists deal with international adoption, all the different genres are represented for adopted Koreans in Sweden. Portraits and interviews of individuals visiting Korea are numerous, from the professional fencer Camilla Rosman who competed for the international fencing championship in Korea in 1999 (*Chosun Ilbo* 1/11 1999), to three adopted Korean women who married at the Swedish embassy in Seoul (*Korea Times* 24/1 2000), and the singer Lena Maria who took part in a KBS sponsored contest in 2001 (*Dong-A Ilbo* 12/4 2001). Searches for biological parents or relatives have turned up since the beginning of the 1990s, while stories on adopted Koreans written by foreign correspondents are published now and then. For example, a report on the Department of Korean Studies at Stockholm University from 1994 (*Taehan Maeil* 8/12 1994), and an interview with Astrid Trotzig who in 1996 published the Swedish best-seller *Blod är tjockare än vatten* (Blood is thicker than water), a novel that was translated into Korean in 2002 (*Kookmin Ilbo* 20/11 2001).

This use of the adopted Koreans as a bond between the two countries can be linked to the Korean interpretation of globalisation and the diaspora politics that has surfaced since the end of the Cold War. In 1995 president Kim Young Sam launched a plan for globalisation, *seggyehwa*, and one way of achieving this is to reconnect with the 4.5 million overseas Koreans, who were officially defined as assets in the globalisation drive (Chun 1994).

Chinese Koreans started to arrive in Korea as migrant workers or as brides, filling the shortage of women created by sex-biased abortion (Moon 2000). At the same time, the Korean minority in Central Asia played an intermediary role for Korean investment in the region. In 1997, the Overseas Koreans Foundation was inaugurated as the central authority responsible for overseas Koreans or *chaeoe tongp'o*. The foundation automatically includes the adopted Koreans as an integrat-

ed part of a global Korean community. Using diaspora politics, the South Korean government is trying to overcome its limitations of being a postcolonial, divided and dispersed nation.

Susanne Brink's *Arirang*

In 1991 Chang Kil-su's movie *Susanne Brink's Arirang* was widely seen at Korean cinemas and established the adoption issue among the general public. The movie tells the story of Susanne Brink from her departure from Korea as Shin Yu-suk at the age of three, through her hardships as an adopted Korean in Sweden, and to her return and reunion with her birth mother twenty years later. The script was based on an autobiography published the same year, and reviews of the movie focused on its political message to end international adoption. Through the movie, the real Susanne Brink became Korea's most well-known adopted Korean and several follow-up documentaries have been made about her.

The story begins in a poor neighbourhood in Seoul where a single mother of three children lives a difficult life. The mother decides to relinquish Yu-suk, the youngest daughter, for international adoption. After a final farewell to siblings and neighbours, the mother takes Yu-suk on her back and walks to Kimp'o Airport where a social worker from an adoption agency waits impatiently with two other children who have Belgium as destination. In a heartbreaking scene the mother suddenly regrets her decision, but forces herself to part from Yu-suk as the plane is about to leave.

At Arlanda Airport in Stockholm, a Swedish couple with their biological son eagerly waits for their adoptive daughter. Yu-suk is welcomed as Susanne in a language she doesn't understand and by people whose strange appearances frighten her. She clings desperately to the Korean flight attendant who will be her last contact with a countryman for many years. After a drive to Norrköping, a city south of Stockholm, Susanne enters her new home, a typical suburban middle-class villa.

The movie now continues in a wholly Swedish setting, in Swedish with Korean subtitles and with Swedish actors, except for Susanne herself who is played by the famous Choe Chin-shil. During her teenage

years, Susanne is abused by her adoptive family. Her Swedish brother calls her a "gook," and her adoptive mother beats her and forces her to do housework. After a severe beating, Susanne tries to commit suicide. When entering high school Susanne leaves her adoptive family and moves to a boarding house in Stockholm to start her own life. She meets a Swedish man and ends up as a single mother to a daughter, since the father doesn't want to have a biracial child. A couple of years later she meets another Swedish man, but her best friend from high school manages to steal him from her.

Now, abandoned by everyone — her Korean family, her Swedish family, her daughter's father, her boyfriend, and her best friend — Susanne again tries to commit suicide and ends up in a mental hospital. After being discharged, she moves to another town where she continues to live alone with her daughter. One day a Korean TV-team doing a documentary on adopted Koreans in Europe visits Susanne. While crying, Susanne plays *Arirang* on the piano in front of the camera and asks her biological mother why she sent her away to a country so far from Korea.

After some time Susanne receives a phone call from Korea. Her biological mother has been found through the documentary. Susanne travels to Korea together with her daughter for the first time in more than 20 years. After the reunion with her Korean mother, the movie ends with Susanne giving a speech directed to the Korean people. Susanne tells about the 150,000 Koreans sent away for adoption to foreign countries, and that many are treated poorly and feel unhappy. Finally she demands that Korea has to stop its adoption program.

After *Susanne Brink's Arirang*, the adoption issue has left its mark several times in Korean popular culture. The subject has figured in TV dramas, musicals, plays, comics, movies and pop songs. The media expert John Fiske points out that popular culture creates its own discourses beyond cynical commercial interests (1991). Or to put it another way, when Korean producers of popular culture are using the adoption issue in commodities created for a mass attendance it is not just money that comes in, a discourse comes out.

The adoption issue has figured in official debate since the end of the 1980s, but it is through popular culture that the discourse has become widespread. This established discourse says that the adopted Koreans

are unhappy in their adoptive country, that they are badly treated by their adoptive parents, and that they long for Korea and especially their Korean mothers. That is truly the theme not only in *Susanne Brink's Arirang*, but also in other movies like *Berlin Report* (1991) and *Love* (1999), and in pop songs like Shinawe's *Ömönüü ttang* (1997) and Clon's *Pöryöjin Ai* (1999).

President Kim Dae Jung and the adoption issue

The adoption issue received a lot of attention during the presidency of Kim Dae-jung between 1998-2002. President Kim's interest in the adoption issue goes back to his years in exile and opposition when he met several adopted Koreans in different Western countries. In 1989, he visited the Swedish Institute of International Affairs in Stockholm as a lecturer and met with Lena Kim, an adopted Korean woman who posed him the question why Korea was sending away its children to foreign countries like Sweden. Kim Dae-jung was so touched by her fate as an adopted Korean that he often returns to his acquaintance with her when discussing the adoption issue.

A second meeting took place in Stockholm in 1994, and Lena Kim obtained an interview with Kim Dae-jung for *Um & Yang*, the magazine of the Adopted Koreans' Association of Sweden (Lena Kim 1994). Kim Dae-jung told Lena Kim that there is a special bond between the adopted Koreans and Korea even if they are citizens of another country today. He also stated that in a desperate situation he would himself be prepared to relinquish his own children for adoption, and in reverse, he would himself also consider adopting a foreign child.

In connection with his inauguration as president of the Republic of Korea in early 1998, Kim Dae-jung stated that adoption was to be one of the issues to deal with during his period of service. On the 23rd of October 1998, Kim Dae-jung invited Lena Kim and 28 other adopted Koreans from eight countries to a meeting in the Blue House where he, on behalf of the country and the government, delivered a moving apology for sending away 150,000 Korean children for adoption to the West. In a letter to Lena Kim dated the 11th of January 2001, Kim Dae-jung writes: "Globalization does not mean to live together with other

countries and nations, but in the first place to reconnect to our own blood line, amicably and tenderly.”

Other acts and events worth mentioning during Kim’s presidency were a symposium on the human rights of adopted Koreans held at the National Assembly in April of 1998, the opening of the semi-governmental Adoption Center in downtown Seoul as an information center for adoptees traveling to Korea, and the dual citizenship law that came into effect in 1999 which on the president’s initiative includes adoptees as well. Finally, the government also initiated two visiting programs for adopted Koreans organized by the Overseas Koreans Foundation (1999) and the National Institute for International Education Development (2001) respectively.

Conclusion

With all this said, it becomes clear that both Sweden, as an important receiving country of Korean children, and the adopted Koreans themselves, have played a vital role in accentuating the adoption issue in Korea. The relationship between Sweden and Korea is, on a governmental level, perceived as a physical bond manifested in the 9,000 adopted Koreans of Sweden, and sometimes it is easy to get the impression that adoption is the only, or at least the main, interaction going on between Sweden and Korea.

The 9,000 adopted Koreans of Sweden contributed to the growth of the Korean adoption issue firstly with that spark of official recognition in 1976. Among the adopted Koreans of Sweden, two individuals can be said to have played vital roles in the development of the adoption issue in Korea: Lena Kim through her meetings with Kim Dae Jung, the president who delivered an apology to the adopted Koreans in 1998, and Susanne Brink who told her life story in *Susanne Brink’s Arirang*, the movie whose influence informed the general public of the issue.

Korea’s use of adopted Koreans as a way of creating a physical bond with Western allies like Sweden can also be seen as a cynical political strategy that has parallels in the country’s history. With a background of Confucian thinking such as *sadaejui*, or serving the great, to give away human beings as a way of appeasing a dominating power could

well be said to be a Korean tradition: virgins, or *kongnyŏ*, to the Ming emperor in the 14th century, comfort women, or *chŏngshindae*, to the Japanese during the first half of the 20th century, and adoptees, or *ibyangin*, to the Westerners during the latter half.

The adoption issue itself appears to be a new kind of nationalism — or to use Walker Connor's term, *ethnonationalism* — which is in the process of developing in Korea (Connor 1994). The lack of a unified Korean nation state leads to a racialized nationalism whereby blood, *hyŏlt'ong*, as the lowest common denominator, is beginning to constitute a collective sense of oneness (Park Hyun Ok 1996 and Shin, Freda & Yi 1999). This nationalism seems to be linked to the process of reunification, to the Korean interpretation of the meaning of globalization, and to anti-Western sentiments after the economic crisis.

By winning the struggle of legitimacy on an economic and political level, a wealthy and democratized South Korea can now afford to acknowledge the existence of not only a second Korean state, but also the existence of numerous diverse and de-territorialized Korean communities around the world including the adopted Koreans. During the Cold War, South Korea was almost as encapsulated in a siege mentality as its northern neighbor, accusing emigrants of being un-patriotic and betraying the nation, but now, the country has finally come to understand the importance of the existence of millions of ethnic Koreans outside the peninsula. It is in the shadow of this new ethnonationalism that the adopted Koreans have emerged.

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