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A Tale of Two Motherlands: Bridging the Gap Between the American and Korean Identities of Korean War Adoptees

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Abstract

In 1955, Harry and Bertha Holt successfully petitioned for the passing of Private Law 475 (Holt Bill), allowing for the adoption of eight orphans from South Korea. This was the beginning of a global revolution in transnational and transracial adoption. Prior to this, the idea of adoption outside of the United States was seldom possible; however, the work of the Holt family rationalized with the pubic and garnered much attention from the government and media. Even more so complicated was the idea of mixed-race Korean children, fathered by American G.I.s stationed in the country during the Korean War. Their existence challenged conventional American views of race and hereditary purity. This paper aims to explore the story of Korean orphans in the United States. Moreover, it will attempt to further understand the process of "Americanization," which these children were subjected to. The work will also consider the ways in which both the United States and South Korean governments handled these adoptions. Undeniably, the media played an important role in influencing not only the general public but also the images of the Korean orphans and their families, both biological and adoptive. Finally, this paper will analyze the long-term effects of transnational and transracial adoption on children, taking into account the research of scholars prominent in the field. This will include the study of identity-formation and cultural maintenance in relation post-war Korean adoptees.

The Roots of Transnational Adoption

On October 14, 1955, a plane, dubbed the "stork plane," landed in Portland, Oregon carrying twelve interracial Korean children from Seoul. Accompanying them were Bertha and Harry Holt who would soon claim fame for their efforts to bring transracial and transnational adoption to the American public. Bertha and Harry became aware of the horrors of the Korean War in 1955 after watching a World Vision film that depicted the lives of Korean children orphaned by the war. Moved by the images they witnessed, the Holts saw it as their duty, not only as Christians but also as Americans, to come to the aid of these forsaken children. After petitioning for the passing of Private Law 475 (Holt Bill) in 1955, Holt International Children's Services was founded the following year.[1]

Although it is widely accepted today, transracial and transnational adoptions were seldom considered prior to the mid-1950s. Many Americans were put off by the thought of bringing non-white children into the country, which was made apparent by the existence of racist legislation, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924.[2] With the repeal of such legislation, the opportunity for immigration to the United States was more readily available to people of Asian descent. This also opened the door to transnational adoption from the region.

After the Korean War (1950–1953), over 2.6 million refugees had made their way across the 38th parallel adding to the 3.4 million victims of war already in South Korea in need of food, shelter, and medical care.[3] Of this number, Howard A. Rusk, the Chairman of the American-Korean Foundation, estimated that there were 100,000 war orphans, not to mention the nearly 10,000 "beggar street children."[4] Inside Korean orphanages, which were almost always overcapacity, conditions were deplorable, resources were strained, and diseases, notably tuberculosis, were rampant. However, the United States government perceived these children as a bigger problem.

The U.S. Army Human Factors and Operations Research Unit identified these children, usually born to prostitute or "yanggongju" mothers, a term translating to "Western princess" but usually meant as an insult to "Yankee whore," as a critical element to United States' foreign policy. They believed that democratizing Korean orphans was vital to Cold War aims, and failing to do so could result in children seeking communism as a refuge. Ultimately, this was the United States government's biggest fear.[5] Thus began the United States' campaign for the international

[1] U.S. Government Printing Office. 69 Stat. A161 - An Act for the Relief of Certain Korean War Orphans, Private Law 84-475 § (1955).
[2] Both the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Asian Exclusion Act were overturned by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 but the racial prejudices and stereotypes created by these acts were still prevalent in American society.
[3] Arissa Oh, "Into the Arms of America: The Korean Roots of International Adoption" (PhD Dissertation: The University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, 2008), 57.
[4] Oh, "Into the Arms of America," 58.
[5] Susie Woo, *Framed by War: Korean Children and the Women at the Crossroads of US Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 148.

adoption of Korean children or "waifs," which serves as an acronym for the World Adoption International Fund but also was used to reference Korean adoptees.[6]

With the aid of secular and religious organizations, the latter having had a presence in Korea since the early nineteenth century, American intervention in the area reached a new level in the decades following the Korean War. Their efforts did not stop once Korean children arrived in America. Once on American soil, it was time to begin the process of Christianization, making the Korean "waifs" into model American citizens. The figure of the Korean "waif," and its subsequent transformation to the "All-American" Korean, garnered much attention from American media outlets and the general public, which facilitated financial support for various fundraising organizations.[7]

This paper will demonstrate how the impetus for transracial adoption in the United States was an extension of American hegemony, which was undertaken by the United States government to control the effects of the Korean War, as well as the imminent communist threat in the North. This paper will explore the unique identity that was formed as a result of Korean-American adoption and how this distinction remained separate from both American and Korean identities. This will be accomplished by examining the "Americanization" of Korean orphans by secular and religious organizations, as well as the American public. Furthermore, the work will consider both the immediate and long-term effects of transracial adoption.

Historiography

The Korean War is no stranger to historical scrutiny and analysis. However, the individual stories and overall existence of interracial and G.I. baby orphans are seldom discussed. A handful of scholars have written on the topic, but gaps and deficiencies in the literature still exist, despite this attention. This paper calls for a reassessment of the existing literature based on initial questioning to find new evidence to address these shortcomings.

The existing historiography comprises a group of scholars who all add to the more significant discussion in various ways. Leading scholar, Susie Woo, focuses on the greater narrative and history of Korean transracial adoption in America. Woo introduces the term "waif" to refer to interracial orphans. Other scholars, such as Arissa Oh and Bongoo Park, argue that the adoption of interracial Korean orphans into America was an extension of American expansionism and Christian Americanism. Oh used the term "Christian Americanism" to refer to a group that combined the religiously motivated adoption with the sentiment of American nationalism, thus creating a movement of adoption and Americanization. Both scholars also touch on racial tensions and colorism in America with half-white children preferred over half-Black children. This opens a conversation about race and segregation, which remains a problem in both Korea and the United States.

Other noteworthy scholars who have added to the discourse include Taejin Hwang and Tatiana Moore who provide greater detail on the parents of interracial Korean orphans. Hwang writes

[6] Susie Woo, "'A New American Comes 'Home"': Race, Nation, and the Immigration of Korean War Adoptees, 'GI Babies,' and Brides" (PhD Dissertation: Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 2010), 43.
[7] Woo, "'A New American Comes "Home,"' 59.

about American soldiers in Korea, whereas Moore discusses Korean sex workers and war brides. Yet, both are central to understanding the stories of these children as their background and beginnings lay the foundation of transracial and transnational adoption in the United States.

Scholars of psychology and sociology have produced the dominant scholarship about forming a cultural identity among Korean adoptees. Leading scholars in the field, such as Joy S. Hoffman, Richard M. Lee, Nam Soon Huh, and Paul Wesolowski Kim all draw a correlation between transracial and transnational adoption with the formation of a unique cultural and ethnic identity. Each author includes quantitative and qualitative research on the subject of identity formation. These approaches use similar methodologies mainly concerning individual surveys and questionnaires to examine both the past and present cultural and personal experiences of Korean adult adoptees in the United States. These studies conclude that ethnic identity is greatly related to cultural exposure and socialization during early childhood and young adulthood.

This article will begin by exploring the image of the Korean waif and their journey from abandonment in Korea to the formation of familial ties in America. This discussion will focus on their biological parents and what that meant to both the Korean and United States governments. This is important because it lays the groundwork for what and who will be discussed throughout the paper. The work will then analyze the cultural clash felt by both the Korean adoptees and the American public. This will be done by analyzing media portrayals of Korean waifs and the causes and effects of transnational and transracial adoption in the United States. This is relevant to the discussion because it places the project within a larger narrative of the influence of adoption, as well as the power of media on the American public. Finally, the ideas of identity formation and cultural maintenance will be discussed by examining the different approaches to cultural exposure and the ways Korean adoptees adapted to their new American lives. This is essential to understanding the psychology of transnational and transracial adoption and its effects on the adoptees. Ultimately, the work offers an important discussion in the greater historiography because it adds another layer of questioning and understanding to existing scholarship, thus creating a new and refreshing discourse.

The Korean Problem

The United States government viewed Korean orphans as a by-product of the Korean War and thus were the responsibility of the American public to be rescued, rehabilitated, and civilized.[8] Adoption provided a solution to this issue for both the United States and South Korea: The United States could place themselves in their moral duty as the western "savior," while South Korea could erase the presence of interracial children and G.I. babies, thus reinforcing the idea of *Tangun*. *Tangun* is the belief in the single bloodline as the source of the national identity, which was the driving force behind South Korean president Syngman Rhee's ideology, *Ilminjuui*, or rather, one people-ism. *Ilminjuui* is described as "a strange amalgamation between Japan's colonialism, German fascism, Chinese Confucianism, ultra-right-wing anti-communism, and a Western model of democracy."[9] Due to the nature of Korean society, which emphasized familial ties and bloodlines, it was nearly impossible for orphaned children to have a formal and legal

[8] Bongsoo Park, "Intimate Encounters, Racial Frontiers: Stateless GI Babies in South Korea and the United States, 1953–1965," (PhD Dissertation, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2010), 9.
[9] Park, "Intimate Encounters, Racial Frontiers," 66–67.

existence. This is because children born out of wedlock could not lay claim to their father's family registry, and, in the case of interracial children, the mothers would often deny their child as belonging to them. The Korean Civil Act of 1957 made the process of international adoption easier for children without a family registry.[10] When the South Korean government realized that interracial children could be moved overseas, they began to create individual family registries for the children. In addition to this, the Ministry of Justice and Foreign Affairs allowed guardianship over the adoptees by foreigners without restrictions, and many Americans took advantage of this to simplify and expedite adoption procedures.[11]

In 1961, the South Korean government attempted to counteract the rising number of Korean children (once orphans) in the United States with the establishment of the Orphan Adoption Special Law. This plan sought to pursue transnational adoptions to "resolve the problem of child institutionalization that emerged with the arrival of American missionaries in South Korea."[12] In addition, Korean policymakers aimed to add further protection for the children when it came to transnational adoption, with the added precaution that children would be formally adopted prior to leaving for the United States. This was done to avoid the issue of stateless children living in the United States. The South Korean government also attempted to locate relatives of orphaned children, as many families were separated during the war. For example, newspaper advertisements seeking relatives of children near adoption were available for forty days before adoptions were finalized. Such actions on the part of the Korean government proved their dedication to preventing the separation of families and relocation of children to the United States.[13]

The American Family and Crossing the Racial Line

The 1950s was a time of change in many aspects of American society, with a particular focus being placed on the so-called all-American or nuclear family. For the United States government, the family was the first line of defense against the communist threat and thus, needed to be preserved and upheld. For childless couples, adoption made it possible for them to participate in this national movement. However, international adoption became the popular alternative due to fewer domestic adoption options. In addition, international adoptions were more affordable and expeditious compared to their domestic counterpart. Whereas the adoption of a white American child could take two to three years, the adoption of a Korean child would only take a few months.[14] This increased adoption rates in Korea by a multiple of ten and resulted in a wave of Korean and interracial children entering the United States. This was only possible with Bertha and Harry Holt's advocation for the adoption of Korean orphans. Prior to the passing of the Holt Bill, couples were limited to having two adoptees in their families. The Holts opened the door to a rapid increase of transnational and transracial adoption in the United States.

Nevertheless, not all Americans were provided with an equal opportunity to adopt. With the prevailing notions of racial purity and segregation, many African American couples were denied

[10] Park, "Intimate Encounters, Racial Frontiers," 56–58.
[11] Park, "Intimate Encounters, Racial Frontiers," 58.
[12] Woo, *Framed by War*, 116.
[13] Woo, *Framed by War*, 116–117.
[14] Woo, *Framed by War*, 99.

access to transnational adoption. While they were not outright denied due to their race, the systemic racism in which the requirements for adoption were written greatly affected non-white couples. Most state adoption laws required that the adoptive couple be "married, middle-class homeowners with a separate bedroom for the child, a stay-at-home mother, and financial stability."[15] This directly impacted African American couples interested in adoption as many were not approved for bank loans and received unequal pay. However, the rules relaxed when an influx of Korean-Black children emerged on the adoption market and slowly African Americans began being approved for adoption.

The existence of Korean-Black children presented a challenge for both the South Korean and United States governments. Korea saw these individuals as a blemish on society and a problem that needed solving. The Korean government did not want to acknowledge the existence of these individuals for fear of tarnishing the nation's perceived sense of racial purity. This led to discrimination against Korean-Black children who comprised a relatively small portion of the orphan population in Korea. Of an estimated 100,000 orphans, approximately 1,500 were Korean-Black, but they suffered the most abuse.[16] In the United States, Christian organizations believed that interracial children would flourish in a racially tolerant country and in turn, interracial children became meaningful figures for their significance to racial integration.[17]

In reality, Korean-Black children still faced discrimination once they arrived in the United States. Harry Holt even pronounced that only Korean-Black children belonged in African American families, thus reinforcing the Black-white color line in America. Similar to Korean-white children, Korean-Black adoptees were erased of their "Asianness"; however, Korean-Black children were considered socially and legally as African Americans, whereas Korean-white children were fully embedded in white society.[18] This was endorsed by the government and welfare agencies who supported segregation by way of their decisions to place Korean and Korean-white children with white families and Korean-Black children with African American families. They also faced pressure from the American public who supported racial segregation among Korean adoptees.[19] These sentiments were both publicized and promoted by the media in ways that brought the war back to United States.

Media Portrayal of Transracial Adoption

Korean orphans captured public interest in the United States from the beginning of the Korean War. The inception of the war-torn Korean orphan became commonplace in American news outlets and media, with vivid images of children living in poverty and rubble caused by the conflict.[20] The media focused heavily on "full-blooded" Korean children, thus ignoring the existence of interracial children, who comprised nearly 70% of Korean adoptions in the 1950s. This was done in an attempt to suppress the problems associated with so-called G.I. babies, such

[15] Woo, *Framed by War*, 126.
[16] Arissa Oh, "A New Kind of Missionary Work: Christians, Christian Americanists, and The Adoption of Korean GI Babies, 1955–1961," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3/4, (Fall 2005), 163.
[17] Park, "Intimate Encounters, Racial Frontiers," 170-171.
[18] Woo, *Framed by War*, 124.
[19] Woo, *Framed by War*, 125.
[20] Oh, "A New Kind of Missionary Work," 164.

as interracial and pre-marital sex, abandonment by American servicemen, and the existence of Korean birth mothers, who were often sex workers.[21] The media gravitated to the less problematic story of the "full-blooded" Korean child as a way to correct America's failure in the war and mend their political relationship with South Korea. These children were the only remaining presence of the conflict and American intervention in South Korea, thus maintaining a United States military presence in South Korea on the grounds of Christian benevolence and racial pluralism.[22]

In the United States, the media used contrasting images of children once orphaned and hunger-stricken by war with images of the same children smiling, fed, and loving their new American lives. In addition to highlighting their emotional and physical transformations, the media also used the children as a political tool to further advance Cold War sentiments within the United States. Comparing their lives in Korea to their lives in the United States, adoptees became the central figures of cultural assimilation and Americanization. Portrayed as symbolic figures of innocence who had been saved from the perils of communism by the righteous Americans, these children were viewed as "clean slates" on which American ideals and values could be imposed.[23] Altogether ignoring the circumstances surrounding their past, including illicit interracial sex and abandonment by G.I. fathers, the media used the children as a driving force against the communist threat, as well as a propellant of American morals. Within this narrative, Korean adoptees would become the model American citizens.

To become perfect little Americans, Korean adoptees were forced to embrace the "American look." Such "looks" included western haircuts, clothing, entertainment, and food. As a result, they would be deprived of any knowledge of their Korean culture and be fully entrenched within American society. Images of Korean adoptees playing with toy guns, riding carousels, and enjoying American food circulated in the media and reinforced to the American public that they were doing the world a service by saving these children from a life of misery.[24] Images of children such as Kang Koo Rhee and Jimmy Pusan became figures of American nationalism and expansionism.[25]

In addition to extensive attention to Korean adoptees, the media also focused on their biological and adopted parents. The focus was mainly on their mothers, as the notion of motherhood was extremely popular and upheld by the American public. Adopted mothers were viewed in graceful ways that extenuated their Christian benevolence. They were the foremost advocates of white American motherhood and were greatly respected and admired, attributes that were not granted to African American mothers who adopted Korean children. On the contrary, the children's biological Korean mothers were villainized and seen as immoral and unfit for motherhood. [26] The media depicted these women as a danger to their children due to their participation in illicit prostitution. Moreover, they argued that the children would ultimately live immoral lives if left

[21] Woo, *Framed by War*, 112–113.
[22] Woo, *Framed by War*, 113, 131.
[23] Woo, *Framed by War*, 134.
[24] Woo, *Framed by War*, 135.
[25] Woo, *Framed by War*, 136.
[26] Park, "Intimate Encounters, Racial Frontiers," 133.

in their care.[27] Such beliefs, so heavily supported by the media, would ultimately have significant effects on these children as they grew and developed within American society while simultaneously trying to stay connected with their Korean culture.

Culture Clash: The Case for Identity Formation

In the decades following the mass transnational and transracial adoption of Korean and interracial orphans to the United States, many psychologists wondered how these children developed into adulthood. This morphed into questioning if Korean adoptees stayed connected to their Korean heritage and how this would progress while living in majority-white communities. With these questions in mind, multiple psychologists began conducting interviews and surveys with Korean adoptee adults, in an attempt to understand the roots of cultural identity formation and maintenance. Most research was conducted through various questionnaires with different categories that all dealt with degrees of cultural association. These included areas such as interpersonal Korean associations, cultural encounters, and racial awareness.[28] One researcher concluded that early connections with Korean culture would result in one's association with their heritage in adulthood.[29] Another found that learning about Korean culture as a child combined with being raised in an ethnically diverse community increased one's association with their heritage.[30]

The evidence of the importance of cultural exposure in relation to cultural identity formation is pivotal to the understanding of the Korean adoptees in the United States. Because the American public tried tirelessly to suppress adoptees' culture and heritage, many adults came to the realization that they belonged to neither to the United States nor Korea.[31] This undoubtedly impacts personal development and shapes one's vision of themselves. It begs the question: Who is responsible for such a confusion of identity? The onus is on both the United States government and the adopted parents. First, it was the government that pushed for cultural assimilation and Americanizing. They sought to take the Asian out of these children by labelling them as either white or Black. The media also emphasized the need to Christianize and Americanize these children for the children's benefit. The adopted parents are also responsible for their lack of inclusion in the children's Korean culture. While this is not the case for all families, many chose to ignore the Korean side of the children's heritage and focus more on their new American life. It is now accepted that such practices were detrimental to the children's personal cultural development, thus creating a quasi-American-Korean identity.[32] While more research is needed in this field, it is conclusive that when participating in transnational and transracial adoption, adoptive parents must be prepared to introduce the child to their culture and allow them to participate and learn. Sadly, Korean adoptees of the 1950s and 1960s did not receive such experiences, thus resulting in cultural identity confusion.

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[27] It is important to note that not all mothers of Korean orphans were sex workers; however, this was the sentiment of the U.S. media which was widely portrayed.

[28]Sueyoung L. Song and Richard M. Lee, "The Past and Present Cultural Experiences of Adopted Korean American Adults," *Adoption Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (2009), 25.

[29] Song and Lee, The Past and Present Cultural Experiences of Adopted Korean American Adults," 30.

[30] Paul Wesolowski Kim, "Ethnic Identity Development of Korean, International, Transracial Adoptees," (PhD Dissertation, The Wright Institute, Berkeley, California, 2008), 63-64.

[31] Song and Lee, The Past and Present Cultural Experiences of Adopted Korean American Adults," 32.

[32] Song and Lee, The Past and Present Cultural Experiences of Adopted Korean American Adults," 33.

Conclusion

Deann Borshay, born Kang Ok Jin, was one of the thousands of Korean children adopted and sent to the United States. As an adult, she was left wondering where her place in the world was. Although grateful for the opportunities presented to her due to her adoption, she felt a hole in herself and sought to find the answers to her questions. Borshay was one of many who looked for and located her Korean birth mother, bridging the gap between her American and Korean identities.[33] The Korean War left many children abandoned and orphaned, usually by the American servicemen fathers and sex worker mothers. Adopted by Americans, many saw them as souls to be saved, which virtually erased any evidence of their past Korean lives.

Transracial and transnational adoption in the United States was an extension of American hegemony. It attempted to garner support for anti-communist sentiments and bolstered American Christian morals and ideals. However, there are long-term impacts of such adoptions on the unique identity formed by the children of Korean-American adoption through the process of Americanization in both the home and in the media. There is a community of Korean adoptees, now adults, who see no place for themselves in either American or Korean society. Therefore, more emphasis and attention needs to be placed on the impact of transracial and transnational adoption on the children and their cultural identity development.

Today, South Korea still places hundreds of children up for transnational adoption. This problem is catching the attention of the Korean public who have begun pressuring the government to find a better way in which to keep Korean children in Korea. This has led to a revaluation of adoption policies and procedures, but a solution has yet to be reached. Many believe that the problem lies in Korean culture and the stigma surrounding single mothers, which results in larger numbers of abandoned children. An increase in government assistance to single mothers and a change in societal beliefs could decrease the number of children going up for adoption.[34]

The story of post-war Korean adoptees to the United States exemplifies the effects of heritage deprivation and the need for cultural stimulation and inclusion. However, the story does not have to repeat itself, and the future of transnational adoption can continue with an inclusive and thoughtful approach. With this mindset, these adoptions can be a mode of diplomacy and international relations, which provide an opportunity for cultural and racial integration, both of which were attempted and failed by the United States government in the 1950s and 1960s. It is the hope that there will be a continuation of this discussion so that practical and purposeful solutions can be accomplished.

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[33] "Korean War's Secret Legacy Lives on in Children Adopted in U.S.," CNN (Cable News Network, December 12, 2000), http://www.cnn.com/2000/US/12/12/us.korea.adoption.reut/.

[34] "Korea Still Sends Hundreds of Babies Abroad for Adoption," The Chosun Ilbo (English Edition): Daily News from Korea - National/Politics > National, November 21, 2011, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/11/21/2011112101124.html.

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