FROM ORPHAN TRAINS TO BABYLIFTS

COLONIAL TRAFFICKING, EMPIRE BUILDING, AND SOCIAL ENGINEERING

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International adoption, sometimes known as intercountry or transnational adoption, the movement of mainly nonwhite children from the postcolonial so-called Third World to predominantly white adopters in North America, Northern and Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, was born in the mid-1950s in the aftermath of the Korean War. This huge child migration, today involving close to 30,000 children annually, has transferred an estimated half a million children, of whom almost one third come from Korea.

The practice was initiated in the receiving countries as a rescue mission with strong Christian undertones, while during the 1960s and '70s it came to be perceived as a progressive act of solidarity. Today, in the leading adopting regions of North America, Western Europe, and Oceania, international adoption has developed into the last resort for many suffering from infertility, while a discourse of multiculturalism celebrates international adoptees as bridges between cultures, symbols of interethnic harmony, and embodiments of global and postmodern cosmopolitanism. At the other end, in the sending countries, the governments conceive of international adoption as part family-planning method and part child welfare practice. Despite regular outbursts of criticism regarding international adoption coming from domestic oppositional circles in the countries of origin, most governments treat international adoption as a necessary evil, even though they consider it a degrading and humiliating business, well aware that the practice saves social welfare expenditure and generates huge amounts of money for a profitable adoption industry.

Academically, studies of international adoption are usually limited to the fields of medicine and psychiatry or to social work and psychology. Instead of following in the footsteps of these dominant ways of looking at international
adoption and merely reproducing mainstream adoption research, I examine and analyze the practice from a different perspective, employing the lenses of anthropology and migration history. American empire building and international relations, and Korean military authoritarianism and patriarchal modernity, I use international adoption from Korea as the principal case study, as Korea has by far provided the most internationally adopted children, and since the practice itself was initiated in connection with the Korean War. At the one end, international adoption is put in relation to a particular Western mode of adopting and to other previous and contemporary child and forced migrations, and set within the context of emerging American world dominance after World War II. At the other end, international adoption is connected to Korea’s modernization process and seen as a disciplining method of regulating and controlling women’s bodies and reproduction in the name of social engineering and development. Lastly, I argue that to fully understand international adoption’s history and current articulation, it is necessary to study it from many different angles and perspectives.

the western mode of adoption

International adoption reflects a particular method of Western adoption, going back to the first American adoption law in Massachusetts in 1851, and, through international cooperation (however coerced), this specific way of adopting is rapidly spreading across the globe, destroying and replacing non-Western traditions of fostering children among extended kinship networks. Adoption as social practice or legal institution has existed in every culture in the world at some time. However, modern Western adoption practice deviates from most practices worldwide because it is overwhelmingly extra-familial, meaning that no biological or other relationship exists between the birth and adoptive families prior to adoption, and above all that the link between the birth family and the adoptee is generally totally severed so that they will remain unknown to each other, and the adoptive family gives the child a completely new identity by law.

American feminist Mary Kathleen Benet proposes that this unique and peculiar Western mode of adoption can be seen as a compensation for the breakdown of the extended family as a result of modernization and the corresponding elevation of the nuclear family in Western countries. A parallel to this, pointed out by several adoption researchers, is how middle-class, Western concepts of abandonment and abandoned children diverge from those in non-Western societies, where fostering and circulation of children among relatives are much more common than adoption itself. Yet the divergent concepts are made hegemonic by way of conventions like the Hague Conference on Intercountry Adoption. It should be noted that the Western mode of adoption is changing slowly; in many Western countries birthmothers whose children were adopted away before the revolution of 1968 have begun to
come out and raise their voices. They are writing books about their experiences and speaking out about how all too often they were pressured and coerced into giving up their children by family, social workers, adoption agencies, and religious groups, and they are challenging sealed records, trying to reconnect with their children, and advocating open adoption practices where the link between the birth families, the adoptee, and the adoptive family is not completely broken off.

**comparative child and forced migrations**

International adoption, the movement of children from non-Western countries to adoptive parents in the West, was initiated on a large scale in connection with the Korean War, even if Western missionaries, settlers, and tradesmen occasionally had previously adopted “indigenous” or “native” children at the time of the classical colonial era. Such examples of transracial adoptions precede as well as parallel the Korean case: the kidnapping of 18,000 Roma children in 18th-century imperial Austria, who were put into Catholic foster homes to dilute Romani bloodlines; the 50,000 “lost birds” of Native American children in Canada and the United States who were placed in white families up until as late as the mid-1990s; and the “stolen generations” of 25,000 Aboriginal children in Australia who between 1900 and 1970 were forcibly separated from their parents and transferred to the custody of Anglo families as a civilizing project. However, unlike international adoption, these examples of domestic transracial adoptions of children from indigenous and minority groups to white families have been highly charged and contested and sometimes even branded ethnocide or cultural genocide.

The closest parallels to international adoption in the history of global child migration would be the 130,000 children shipped from the British Isles to populate the Empire between 1618 and 1967, and the 100,000 American children transported by the “orphan train” from the East Coast and placed out to substitute parents in need of labor in the Midwest between 1854 and 1929. Linda Gordon describes an intriguing incident where ethnicity played a major role during the orphan train program. In 1904, a group of 40 New York Irish orphans was sent to live with Catholic families in Arizona. However, the Catholics turned out to be Mexican Americans, and the local Anglos were so outraged at this transgression of race boundaries that they instigated a mass abduction of the children, carried out at gunpoint. The irony is the sudden “whitening” of the Irish orphans, widely despised by the Protestant majority as “paddies” of a decaying and uncivilized “Celtic race.” Through this direct action, transracial adoption as a white privilege was resolutely reinstated, and this privilege continues in the contemporary era. One can only imagine the reactions if Korean middle-class couples, whether in Korea or living overseas, suddenly started to adopt white children, or if Korean
children were to be sent to Latin American or African countries for international adoption, for that matter.

In the pre–civil rights United States, a handful of states went so far as to legislate against interracial adoption or even fostering of white children by nonwhite people, and in the late 1990s a widely publicized controversy erupted when a black woman in Detroit wanted to adopt a white girl.7

In their magisterial study of children as refugees, Everett Ressler, Neil Boothby, and Daniel Steinbock trace international adoption’s modern precursors back to World War I, when Armenian children who had survived the massacres in the Ottoman Empire were moved to Greece and Russia.8 Hundreds of thousands of children of war (Kriegskinder) from the disintegrating empires of Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Germany were also transferred temporarily as foster children to Great Britain, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the Nordic countries under the supervision of the Red Cross and Save the Children.9 During the Spanish Civil War between the two world wars, 20,000 Spanish children (niños de la guerra) were relocated to institutions and substitute parents in France, Latin America, Scandinavia, and the Soviet Union, of whom 2000 to 3000 stayed permanently.

The same process was repeated before and during World War II when 20,000 Jewish children from Nazi-dominated Central Europe were brought to England and other Western European countries (the Kindertransport), and when 70,000 Finnish children of war (sotapetus) were moved temporarily to Sweden, 10,000 staying as adopted or foster children.10 In addition, the Nazi German Lebensborn program transferred at least 200,000 Eastern European children who, based on their appearances, were deemed racially acceptable and thus worthy of being Germanized and adopted into German families.11 Finally, from the end of the war and up to 1953, around 5000 children from China, Taiwan, Eastern Europe, Greece, Germany, Italy, and Japan, many fathered by American soldiers, were transferred as unaccompanied refugees to the United States for adoption, while more than 2500 Japanese children in Manchuria abandoned by the retreating imperial army were taken into Chinese families.12

Other cases of forced migration preceding the contemporary international adoption boom include the six Taíno Indians—four of whom died almost immediately upon arrival—who Columbus brought back as gifts to the Spanish king with his first voyage of 1492–1493; the Algonquian “Indian princess” Pocahontas who passed away in England in 1617; the Inuit boy Minik who Admiral Robert Peary brought back from Greenland in 1897; and the “Court Negroes” once popular among Europe’s monarchs, one of them being Hannibal, the great-grandfather of Russia’s national poet Aleksandr Pushkin, who was adopted by Czar Peter the Great himself.

Contemporary international adoption, having flown in almost half a million children to Western countries during a period of 50 years, has paral-
els to the Atlantic slave trade—which between 1510 and 1870 shipped 11 million Africans to the New World, to the dispatching of 12 million Indians and Chinese as indentured labor to the vast European empires between 1834 and 1941, and to the present day’s massive trafficking of women and children for international marriage and sexual exploitation. A comparative study of these four subsequent forced migrations, conceptualized as a long Western tradition of transporting nonwhite populations intercontinentally, would make a welcome addition to the literature on both migration and international adoption.

While clearly there are widely divergent purposes for which the enslaved and the adopted have been forcibly made migrants, some striking similarities come to mind when we compare the Atlantic slave trade and international adoption. Both practices are driven by insatiable consumer demand, private market interests, and cynical profit making, and both utilize a highly advanced system of pricing where the young, the healthy, and the light-skinned are the most valued. Both are dependent on the existence of native intermediaries in the form of slave hunters and adoption agencies as well as a reliable and efficient global transportation system of shipping routes. Both the enslaved and the adopted are separated from their parents, siblings, relatives, and significant others at an early age; stripped of their original cultures and languages; reborn at harbors and airports: Christianized, rebaptized, and bestowed with the names of their masters; and in the end only retaining racialized nonwhite bodies that have been branded or given case numbers. The so-called house or servant slaves must have been the closest parallels to international adoptees as both live permanently together with their masters and are legally defined as belonging to their household and their family. Furthermore, both practices have been legitimized by the same shallow argument that when moved to their new homes, the material situations of the slaves and the adoptees are unquestionably greatly bettered as both are benefiting from the wealth and civilization of the West. Finally, both groups are brought over only to satisfy the needs and desires of their well-to-do acquirers.

The anthropologist Igor Kopytoff has also commented on the unsettling parallels between the commodification of slaves and adoptees in his study of the cultural biography of commodities. A crucial difference is, of course, that slave and indentured labor, at least in its classical versions, belong to history, and contemporary trafficking in women is illegal and universally condemned. Only international adoption remains largely uncontested, made legal through various “international” conventions that in reality privilege Western concepts of adoption. In fact, international adoption has even increased since the end of the Cold War as a result of the globalization of predatory neoliberal capitalism, recent transformations in the international division of labor, the mass popularization of the discourse of multicultural-
ism, and a middle-class birthrate rapidly falling to far below replacement level in practically every Western country.14

u.s. empire building

International adoption originated as a rescue mission immediately after the Korean War. Organized by Western individuals and voluntary agencies, the intent was to transfer children fathered by American and other UN soldiers, often the products of large-scale sexual exploitation and military prostitution, to adoptive homes in the United States and Western Europe. The issue of mixed children and war orphans and their difficult conditions in Korea was openly discussed in Western media in the early 1950s, and their numbers were often widely exaggerated.15 This public interest in and obsession with the mixed children of postwar Korea is strongly reminiscent of how Eurasian children in the French and Dutch colonies of Southeast Asia, products of informal concubinary relations or rape and prostitution, were viewed and treated during the classical imperialist age. According to Ann Laura Stoler, who has studied the “mixed question” and the subject of intimate relations in a colonial setting, these children were objects of rescue fantasies and relief projects for the European homeland populations, especially among Christian philanthropist, humanist, and women’s groups. They were represented as abandoned orphans when in reality they often were physically and forcibly separated from their native mothers and assembled and brought together at special orphanages and boarding schools to uphold white prestige and protect their perceived European-ness from being culturally, linguistically, and morally indigenized, but also from becoming politically dangerous as anti-Western father-haters or even father-murderers as adults.16

These mixed-race children epitomized the bodily boundary markers between the colonizers and the colonized as well as a kind of a buffer class, by their very presence challenging Western concepts of child rearing. The same is the case with the stolen generations of mixed Aboriginal children in Australia who were legally taken by force from their indigenous mothers to be uplifted and domesticated, raised and educated as white Australians, again showing how Western ideas of adoption came to rule over and destroy non-Western concepts of fostering and circulation of children among extended family members. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the mostly American concern for and adoption of mixed Asian children in the 1950s differs fundamentally in one important respect from the way the French, Dutch, and British empires in Asia dealt with the problem of mixed children fathered by European settlers before World War II: Few if any of these were ever adopted and moved to metropolitan Europe. Instead they were left behind even after decolonization, as in the case of the Anglo-Indians or Eurasians of India.
The Korean War marked the beginning of the Cold War and the initial stage in global American hegemony. The author Pearl S. Buck, winner of the Nobel Prize in literature and adoptive mother of at least seven mixed children from China, Japan, and Germany, spoke out forcefully to encourage Americans and Western Europeans to adopt Korean children in the 1950s and 1960s. Laura Briggs writes about how Buck used tropes of child rescuing, anticommunism, and American paternalist responsibility to argue for the adoption of Asian children. Buck would eventually engage her own adoption agency, Welcome House—founded in 1949 to adopt mixed children from China and Japan—in the adoption of Korean children. This heavy US involvement in the origin of international adoption and early interest in Asian children is interpreted by Christina Klein as an expression of a Cold War mentality and a discourse on familial love, with America acting the benevolent “white mother” to create familial ties to Asian people through the sponsoring or adopting of Asian children, while Asians were infantilized, feminized, and portrayed as unable to take care of their own children. In this way, argues Klein, international adoption became an integral part of American foreign policy, used to facilitate political relations and to legitimate anti-communist interventions in the region.

The same pattern followed in country after country. Especially in East Asia, from the beginning the dominating supply base of international adoption, the Korean situation was the precedent. American invasions in countries such as Vietnam and Thailand resulted in international adoption from those countries. Thus, it is no coincidence that the countries supplying the most children for international adoption to the West, and primarily to the United States, almost all fall under the American sphere of influence and have been exposed to American military intervention, presence, or occupation, even if civil wars, ethnic cleansing of minorities, and corrupt dictatorships also must be added to explain why these supplying countries became involved with the practice in the first place. Even if African and Muslim countries like the Sudan, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, and Iraq are missing from the list of sending countries in the US sphere of influence, the list is still long: Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, India, and Sri Lanka in Asia; and Colombia, Chile, Brazil, Peru, Honduras, Haiti, Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala in the Americas. The fact that Asia dominates as a continent further underscores the orientalist bias at work, where Asian children in many Western countries are widely perceived as being docile and submissive, clever, hardworking, kind, quiet, and undemanding, besides being cute, childlike, and petite.

The Korean Modernity Project

In 1960 a student uprising ended Korea’s first president Syngman Rhee’s increasingly autocratic rule, which was followed by a short period of democra-
tization. Park Chung Hee's military revolution of 1961 abruptly curtailed the short experiment with democracy and installed a dictatorial military regime that harshly oppressed its students and workers, guided by fierce anticommunism, developmentalism, and modernization theory. At the time of the military takeover, Korea was still an agrarian society suffering from symptoms of mass poverty, typical for a developing country. Eliminating these symptoms became a major focus. Within a period of 30 years after the start of the first 5-year economic plan in 1962, the authoritarian developmental state of Korea transformed itself from an agricultural society to a modern industrial nation with astonishing speed and horrifying efficiency. The two principal measures implemented to decrease a perceived overpopulation were family planning and emigration; international adoption can be seen as a combination of both. Hence, the era of authoritarian regimes with presidents Park Chung Hee (1961–1979) and Chun Doo Hwan (1981–1987) was to become the time when international adoption witnessed its heyday; three out of four of all placements occurred during those periods.

One of the earliest actions of Park's military government, on September 30, 1961, was to pass the Orphan Adoption Special Law, Korea's first modern adoption law, followed by the Child Welfare Act, both meant to facilitate international adoption as an alternative to costly institutional care. The decree created a legal basis for international adoption of Korean children and established a framework for the most effective adoption industry in the world, characterized by efficient agencies, speedy procedures, and secure logistics. After an amendment in 1967, the law stipulated that every adoption take place according to Korean law and through a government-licensed agency working closely with a Western counterpart, both of which charged fees to adoptive parents. The agencies mandated for international adoption were expected to employ professional social workers, doctors, and nurses to run the orphanages as well as provide both short- and long-term foster care and domestic adoption. The passing of the adoption law and the setting up of an institutional framework for international adoption marked the professionalization of social work and the bureaucratization of social welfare in Korea. From then on, Korea would embark on a rocky road from tradition to modernity; international adoption was to become one of its most successful self-regulating and self-disciplining practices of control and purification in the reproductive field.

In 1979 President Park Chung Hee was killed by one of his closest aides and after a short democratization period, the new military strongman president, Chun Doo Hwan, came to power through a coup d'état. In 1980 the new government outlined a new approach to international adoption, integrated in the so-called nongovernmental foreign policy to expand the emigration program and further develop friendship ties with Western allies. Through a process of government deregulation, the quota system was abolished and the
four agencies were allowed to compete with each other in tracking down unrestricted numbers of adoptable children. Consequently, a thriving adoption industry was created and resulted in the largest numbers ever sent abroad in a decade, with almost 70,000 international placements. The agencies engaged themselves in profit-making business activities and real estate investments, and were running their own delivery clinics, foster homes, and temporary institutions, and most importantly, administering a growing number of maternity homes for young and unwed mothers to secure a continuous supply of healthy newborns.

The number of international adoptions has gone down since the 1980s, although it still involves around 2000 Korean children every year. At the same time, the relinquishing mothers are now almost all teenagers or at least under the age of 25 years, and often spend their pregnancies behind the secluded walls of the agencies’ own maternity homes; the majority come from middle-class backgrounds where the stigma of premarital sexual activity has the potential to ruin future social advancement for both parents and children. So in Korea for more than half a century, international adoption has been an economically rewarding business for the adoption agencies, an easy way out of avoiding social welfare expenditures for the Korean government, and, most importantly, a brutal method of upholding a rigid patriarchal system for Korean society as a whole. International adoption is, in other words, one of the Korean modernity project’s most long-lived mechanisms of power, used to cleanse the country of “impure” and “disposable” outcasts in the name of social engineering and eugenics.

**between colonialism and modernity**

It is through this understanding of the intimate and indivisible relationship between colonial and modernist modes and manners that I conceptualize international adoption as a mixed project of colonial uplifting, civilizing, and assimilating non-Western children and modernist service professionalization and institutionalization of family intervention so as to regulate, control, and discipline women’s reproduction, ultimately upholding a patriarchal system in the countries of origin. In this way, international adoption allows us to understand the contradictory complexities of power not only on the Western side, but also from the Koreans, with their decision to act as intermediaries in tracking down and delivering adoptable children. I am consciously distancing myself both from those nationalists in the supplying countries who blame everything on Western racism, and from critics of international adoption in Western receiving countries who blame everything on traditional values. Instead, I am trying to understand how international adoption has developed and exists between a complex dynamics of the twin projects and double bind of colonialism and modernity.
notes

1 It is important to note that so-called domestic adoptions of First Nations children in North America can also be considered international adoptions, since they involve nation-to-nation transfers.


7 Randell Kennedy, Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 389–392. Two famous but nonetheless extremely rare examples of such reversed, switched, and almost counterfactual adoption cases are the white orphans in Rudyard Kipling’s famous novel Kim from 1901 and in the Nobel Prize-winner Rabindranath Tagore’s equally well-known novel Gom (1924), both raised as natives in British India.


10 Perni Käven, 70 000 små syster [70,000 Small Sisters] (Oratampi: Sahlgren, 1994); Ingrid Lomfors, Förmoda barnnamn, dödsnamnen liv: Disjuti i flyktinghemmen från Nazityrkiet [Lost Childhood, Regained Life: The Jewish Refugee Children From Nazi Germany] (Gothenburg University, Department of History, 1996).


