Adoption

International adoption, also known as intercountry or transnational adoption, denotes the movement of children for adoption between countries and commonly refers to the global flow of adoptees from the non-Western world to adopters in the West. Although small numbers of children have been exchanged cross-culturally earlier in history, the modern form of international adoption was initiated after the Korean War (1950–53). During the following half-century, at least half a million children from over one hundred different countries in South America, Africa, Asia, Oceania and Eastern Europe were adopted into around 20 Western countries. This migration of children is currently expanding rapidly, with an estimated 30,000 international placements a year.

Transporting large numbers of people intercontinentally began with the emergence of global European empires in the 15th and 16th centuries. Historical precedents for international adoption include the child migration programme of the British Empire which between around 1800 and 1967 shipped out over 100,000 destitute children from Great Britain to foster parents in Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, the American orphan-train programme which between 1854 and 1929 placed an equal number of orphans from the East Coast with substitute families in the Midwest, and the occasional taking in of indigenous and native children by white settler families in the colonies. This included the tens of thousands of First Nations children in Canada and the US who were placed in white families for adoption throughout the 20th century, and the 'stolen generations' of at least 25,000 Aboriginal children in Australia who between 1900 and 1970 were transferred to the custody of Anglo families. The adoption of children from indigenous and minority populations by white families in Europe's settler colonies is nowadays highly contested and charged, and sometimes branded as ethnocide or cultural genocide as part of an ongoing postcolonial reconciliation process.

International adoption's origins can also be traced back to the refugee movements of European children that took place in connection with World War 1 and World War 2. After World War 1, thousands of Armenian and Austrian children from the disintegrating Ottoman and Habsburg Empires were sent to temporary foster homes in Russia and Greece, and in Switzerland, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries respectively. During the interwar years, 20,000 Spanish children were relocated to France, the Soviet Union, Scandinavia, Mexico, Venezuela and Chile at the time of the Spanish Civil War, and an equal number of Jewish children from Nazi Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia were brought to the UK, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Scandinavia. A substantial number of these unaccompanied refugee children never returned to their birth countries after the wars, and were instead adopted by their host families. The same is true for the largest of these temporary placement programmes, namely that involving the 70,000 Finnish children of war who were transported to Sweden during World War 2, of whom almost 10,000 stayed permanently as adoptive or foster children. Finally, at the end of the war, the United States allowed into the country for adoption around 5,000 children from countries like China and Taiwan, Greece, Germany, Italy and Japan, many fathered by American occupation troops.

During the Cold War of the 1950s, American military interventions in Asia and the decolonization process, international adoption became established as a transnational migration phenomenon on a mass scale, particularly in the aftermath of the Korean War. The impetus arouse out of a desire to place the mixed-race children of Korea, mostly fathered by Western soldiers, in the countries that participated in the UN-led anti-Communist coalition, backed by the Korean government and in cooperation with child welfare agencies like the International Social Services. From then on, the movement of unaccompanied children between countries came to be perceived and treated as a child welfare practice rather than as a refugee rescue mission. It was handled by private adoption agencies instead of being organized state-to-state, and made possible by changes in migration and citizenship laws in both the countries of origin and in the receiving countries. It also gradually became an institutionalized legal practice in international, law, included within the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and from 1993 by way of the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption. Korea's international adoption programme has functioned as a blueprint and model for other

countries of origin, while Korean children dominated the field of international adoption until the mid-1990s when children from China and Russia surpassed them in number.

Asia dominated as a supplying continent in the 1950s and 1960s with countries under the American sphere of influence during the Cold War like South Korea, South Vietnam and the Philippines providing the largest numbers of children. The same was true for Latin American countries like Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, El Salvador and Chile, which became involved in the practice after 1970 when international adoption increased dramatically due to a drastic decrease in domestic adoption in the West. In the 1980s, Korea, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Peru, Guatemala and Ethiopia became more important as countries of origin, and in the 1990s Eastern European countries like Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Bulgaria and Romania entered the scene after the fall of Communism. At the same time, China and Vietnam started to become involved with international adoption as a part of their respective opening up to the West, while South Africa, Kazakhstan and Cambodia also increasingly turned up in the global adoption statistics. At the other end, the leading adopting countries have always been the United States and Canada, Australia and New Zealand, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland and Germany, while Italy and Spain have appeared as important receivers during recent years. The demographic geography and political economy of international adoption have thus roughly followed the course of globalization as it is usually described for the past half-century.

Several attempts have been made in demographic studies to quantify the volume of global transfers of children for international adoption during given periods. Estimates for the 1980s are 170,000–180,000 for the decade with about 16,268 placements a year, growing to an annual average of 23,857 cases for the early 1990s and 32,295 for the late 1990s. All estimates agree that the United States takes in the most in absolute numbers, perhaps two-thirds of all children, that the Scandinavian countries of Norway, Sweden and Denmark, and nowadays also Spain, are adopting the most per capita, that Korea is the uncontested leading country of origin with 160,000 international adoptees, and that international

adoption has been rapidly on the increase since the end of the 1990s. According to the official statistics from the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, formerly the US Immigration and Naturalization Service, a total number of 358,538 children was brought to the United States for international adoption between 1948 and 2004. This could mean an additional 150,000 placements in Europe, Australia and New Zealand, and consequently an estimated global number of something like 500,000 international adoptions between 1948 and 2004.

International adoption highlights political and economic power relations between supplying and receiving countries and problems regarding post- and neocolonialism, and raises issues of gender and race, and questions concerning ethnic identities and national belonging. International adoption is in practice a one-way migration of children from non-Western countries to the West. The Asian children being adopted, especially, have always predominantly been girls, in the case of China over 90 per cent, and minority children are heavily overrepresented, for example Roma children from Bulgaria, indigenous children from India, and Black and Amerindian children from Colombia. Since the migrants are children, normally under the age of 10–12, it is impossible to call these voluntary migrants; they do not exercise any choice or agency over their own destinations or moves. International adoption is primarily demand-driven, and the current dramatic increase reflects a growing infertility rate in Western countries as well as a growing number of single and homosexual adopters, while the supply side is often explained by patriarchal structures and racial and social discrimination in the countries of origin. International adoption has developed into a politically charged and controversial issue in leading supplying countries such as Brazil, Guatemala and India, and Korea, for example, has repeatedly tried to regulate and put an end to the practice ever since the mid-1970s. Finally, adult international adoptees from countries like South Korea and Vietnam have themselves recently started to reach out to each other transnationally, creating diaspora-like networks and resuming connections to their birth countries.

Tobias Hübinette

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