President Kim Dae Jung and the adoption issue

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Introduction

Overseas adoption or *haeoeibyangmunjê* has been an emotional societal issue in South Korea since the end of the 1980s, but never has the subject been as highlighted as during Kim Dae Jung's presidency lasting from February 1998 to February 2003.¹ President Kim has indeed shown a remarkable interest in the adoption issue. In October of 1998 during his first year in office, president Kim officially apologized for sending 150,000 Korean children abroad for adoption in a speech at the Blue House in front of 29 invited adopted Korean community leaders. Together with his wife the First Lady Lee Hee-ho, during his term president Kim has managed to put the issue firmly on the country's political agenda. This article is an attempt to sum up and evaluate the most important acts and events concerning overseas adoption during Kim's presidency.

Overseas adoption and the role of former presidents

Overseas adoption from Korea was initiated as a result of Western engagement in the Korean War as the first children who left the country were bi-racial. In 1954, South Korea's first president Syngman Rhee who himself had adopted a son,² set up the governmental body Child Placement Service with the aim of adopting away the thousands of bi-racial children often abandoned by both their Western fathers and Korean mothers.³

Overseas adoption became an issue in the post-war era as part of the propaganda war waged between the two Koreas, and from the beginning of the 1970s North Korea was openly accusing the South of selling off Korean children to Westerners as an outright example of so called flunkeyism or *sadaejuûi*. *Pyongyang Times* wrote: "The traitors of South Korea, old hands at treacheries, are selling thousands, tens of thousands of children going ragged and hungry to foreign marauders under the name of 'adopted children'."⁴

The negative highlighting of the issue led to panic-stricken temporary stops, ⁵ overseas adoption was transformed to something close to a state official secret and from 1975 domestic adoption in South Korea was promoted.⁶ In 1976, the self-confident president Park Chung Hee answered by unconventionally inviting the 20,000 adopted Koreans living in Scandinavia to a motherland tour.⁷ As the overwhelming majority of the adoptees were still small children at that time, this symbolic invitation lead to nothing more than the first official recognition of the existence of the adopted Koreans.

To take part in charity activities is a tradition among the various former presidential wives and First Ladies of Korea, and in 1982 First Lady Lee Soon-ja, wife of president Chun Doo Hwan, attended an opening ceremony of the Holt school in Ilsan north of Seoul, run by the dominant Korean adoption agency Holt and financed by foreign contributions from adoptive parents of Korean children.⁸

President Kim Young Sam (1993-97), South Korea's first democratically elected president with a non-military background, is credited for the launching of the country's globalization politics called *segyehwa*. The president stated that "globalization must be underpinned by Koreanization",⁹ and the way to achieve this was to reconnect to the close to 5 million overseas Koreans officially defined as assets in the globalization drive.¹⁰

In 1993, the first World Korean Ethnic Festival was held as a part of this ethnic mobilization,¹¹ in 1996 special government scholarships were established for overseas Koreans,¹² and in 1997 Overseas Korean Foundation was inaugurated as the main authority dealing with overseas Koreans or *chaeoe tongp 'o* in this particular Korean interpretation of globalization. Adopted Koreans were from the beginning invited to the annual World Korean Ethnic Festival and were also eligible for the government scholarships, while the foundation automatically includes the group as an integrated part of this visionary global Korean community.

President Kim Young Sam was also the first Korean president with a clear social welfare policy,¹³ painfully aware of the fact that Korea is the O.E.C.D. country in the world spending the least on social welfare.¹⁴ Through his commitment to social welfare issues, president Kim also showed an interest in overseas adoption, an often forgotten aspect of him which *Dong-A Ilbo*'s Yi Nak-yôn pointed out while comparing the two political rivals Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung in an article from 1999.¹⁵

Kim Dae Jung and his interest in the adoption issue

Kim Dae Jung has been called "Korea's Nelson Mandela" with his background as an opposition and dissident leader during the authoritarian regimes of 1961-87. He has endured oppression and prosecution, kidnapping and assassination attempts, house arrest and jail, and both in Korea and internationally he is greatly admired both for his reconciliation politics towards South Korea's troubled past and towards the Northern neighbor through his well-known *sunshine policy* which earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000.¹⁶

Born in 1925 and coming from a humble background in the southern province of Cholla, Kim was raised by an impoverished widowed mother, became a Catholic in 1956 and identifies himself strongly with the poor and the destitute through the indigenous Korean populist discourse of *minjung*.¹⁷ After the premature decease of his first wife, Lee Hee-ho with a degree in social work and a strong interest in social issues has been Kim Dae Jung's life companion since 1962.¹⁸

Kim Dae Jung's interest in the adoption issue goes back to his time in opposition and exile when he met several adopted Koreans in different Western countries, for example through his friendship with the famous American Orientalist professor Edwin Reischauer who's son had adopted a Korean child.¹⁹ Already in 1982, he had asked himself in one of his prison letters to his wife how it is possible to morally defend the annual sending abroad of thousands of children for adoption in spite of a fast developing economy.²⁰

In 1989, Kim Dae Jung visited the Swedish Institute of International Affairs in Stockholm for lecturing and became acquainted with Lena Kim, an adopted Korean woman living in the city who at a meeting posed him the question why Korea is sending away its children to foreign countries like Sweden.²¹ Kim Dae Jung was moved to tears and became so touched by her fate as an adopted Korean in Sweden that he always comes back to Lena Kim when discussing the adoption issue.²²

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.²³ Kim Dae Jung told in the interview 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 he would also himself consider adopting a foreign child.

Adoption politics under president Kim Dae Jung

In connection with his inauguration as president of the Republic of Korea in early 1998, Kim Dae Jung stated that overseas adoption was to be one of the main issues to deal with during his period of service, and he has truly been faithful to this commitment.²⁴ On the 23rd of October 1998, Kim Dae Jung invited Lena Kim and 28 other adopted Korean community leaders from eight countries to a special 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.²⁵

In a letter to Lena Kim after the meeting, Kim Dae Jung wrote: "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. That may function as the bridge which will make globalization possible."²⁶ After the apology in the Blue House two of the participants from the U.S., Thomas Park Clement and David Um Nakase, were elected by president Kim as members of the Advisory Council on Democratic and Peaceful Unification of Korea, originally founded by president Chun in the 1980s. As both are bi-racial, by selecting those two president Kim also contributed to strengthen the rights of a vulnerable group as bi-racial children in Korea often face discrimination.

Other acts and events worth mentioning during the past years are a symposium on the human rights of overseas adopted Koreans and Korea's adoption policy held at the National Assembly in April of 1998,²⁷ the opening of the semi-governmental Adoption Center in 1999 in downtown Seoul as an information center for adoptees traveling to Korea,²⁸ a dual citizenship law that came into effect in 1999 which on the president's initiative includes adoptees as well,²⁹ and the dispatching of Kim Duk-soo and his Samul Nori group in the year of 2000 for a tour in Northern Europe with the explicit aim of spreading Korean culture to the adopted Koreans living in the region. Finally, the government has also initiated two visiting programs for adopted Koreans organized by Overseas Korean Foundation (from 1999) and the National Institute for International Education Development (from 2001) respectively,³⁰ modeled after the first and longest running program arranged by Y.W.C.A Seoul since 1990.

On the policing front, there is an on-going discussion if the country should ratify the 1993 international Hague convention on adoption.³¹ If ratifying, the fear is that overseas adoption will increase sharply as the current restrictions in the forms of quotas have to be lifted. Another discussion recently started on how to increase the domestic adoption of handi-

capped children as the overseas adoption of those most needing children is incredibly 35 times higher than the first mentioned.³²

A physical relationship between Korea and the West

Since the Korean War 150,000 Koreans have been adopted to 20 Western countries, more or less those who took part as U.N. allies backing South Korea in the conflict. Close to 100,000 are living in the U.S. consisting of half of all inter-country adopted children and 10 percent of the total ethnic Korean population in that country, around 50,000 in Europe in countries and regions like France, Germany, Switzerland, England, Italy, Be-Ne-Lux and Scandinavia, representing an estimated half of both all inter-country adoptees and ethnic Koreans on the continent. Finally, there are altogether close to 5,000 adopted Koreans in Canada, Australia and New Zealand.³³

Of the 50,000 adopted Koreans in Europe almost half are to be found in Scandinavia; 9,000 in Sweden, 8,000 in Denmark and 6,000 in Norway, the countries in the world which in proper order have the highest proportion of inter-country adoptees per capita.³⁴ Parenthetically, in the U.S. the Scandinavian-Americans are amazingly dominating inter-country adoption as well, and naturally also adoption from Korea as 15 percent of the 100,000 adopted Koreans in the country has been placed in the Scandinavian state of Minnesota making up 3 percent of its entire population.³⁵ The adopted Koreans of Scandinavia are almost solely making up the ethnic Korean presence in the region as there are barely 900 immigrants from Korea living in Sweden and even less each in the other two countries, a fact that gives a new dimension to the Korean adoption issue.

In his apology from 1998 and on other occasions, president Kim Dae Jung has portrayed the adopted Koreans, and especially in regions like Scandinavia, as a unique bond between Korea and the West.³⁶ This physical relationship is a recurring theme every time the president visits a Western country affected by adoption from Korea. In March of 2000 Kim Dae Jung visited Germany and mentioned the adopted Koreans in the country in a speech,³⁷ and in October of 2000 when being in Paris with his colleague Jacques Chirac a ceremony was arranged together with an adopted Korean woman living in France.³⁸

In December of 2000 president Kim was honored with the Nobel Peace Prize which he received at a ceremony in Oslo, and a following meeting was held with the Swedish prime minister Göran Persson in Stockholm. Both in Oslo and in Stockholm, special meetings were organized with the First Lady Lee Hee-ho and groups of adopted Koreans, and in Oslo an adopted Korean woman working for the Norwegian television covered the president's visit to the delight of the Korean media.³⁹ In Stockholm, the bond created between the two cultures was again the theme as both the laureate and the Swedish host Persson mentioned the adopted Koreans in their respective speeches,⁴⁰ and besides president Kim met Lena Kim for a fourth time.⁴¹ Two years later the same journalist and adopted Korean from Norway created head-lines again in Korean newspapers by coming to Korea for the first time since her adoption in the company of the Norwegian prime minister Kjell Magne Bondevik.⁴²

The First Lady as a supporter to the adopted Korean community

Already in the 1980s, the first generation of adopted Koreans who had reached adulthood started to organize themselves with Adopted Koreans' Association of Sweden as the first of its kind founded in 1986, and today there are associations in almost every Western country that has adopted from Korea. This adopted Korean community begun to interact globally in the 1990s.

In 1995 a first conference for adopted Koreans in Europe was held in Düsseldorf, Germany,⁴³ and in 1999 an equivalent first conference was held in Los Angeles, U.S.A.⁴⁴ In 1998 G.O.A.L., Global Overseas Adoptees' Link, was created by a group of adopted Koreans who had returned to Korea,⁴⁵ and in 1999 the first International Gathering of Adopted Koreans was held in Washington D.C., the second two years later in Oslo, Norway, and a third being planned for Seoul, Korea, in 2003.⁴⁶

The First Lady Lee Hee-ho has actively supported this community building of adopted Koreans by taking part in meetings, by sending greetings to conferences, and by regularly inviting groups and individuals to the Blue House, thereby sending out clear signals that Korea has not forgotten the adopted Koreans and acknowledging them an important place in Korea's modern and troublesome history. Lee Hee-ho has explicitly stated in an interview in *Kookmin Ilbo* from 2000 that she is strongly committed to the adoption issue and sees herself as a patron for all adopted Koreans worldwide.⁴⁷

A good example of this generous support is a meeting of 46 adopted Koreans and their families in Los Angeles in June of 1998 visited by the First Lady.⁴⁸ During the meeting one of the youngest attendants, the 9-year-old severely handicapped Adam King, boldly asked the wife of the president: "Can we visit you in Korea?". Lee Hee-ho on the spot graciously invited all families present to visit Korea and the Blue House, which they also did November 27 during the year. Two years later on the 5th of April, the then 11-year-old Adam King on the First Lady's initiative solemnly opened the Korean baseball league, a groundbreaking event which dramatically drew attention to the situation for handicapped people in Korea.⁴⁹

Other meetings in the Blue House among several took place on the 11th of July in 1998 with a group of adopted Koreans from New York,⁵⁰ on the 19th of July 1999 when the Hanulsori Kids composed of ten adopted Korean children playing *samulnori* performed for the First Lady,⁵¹ and a huge meeting with 280 people, adopted Koreans including their family members, on the 8th of July in 2000.⁵² Furthermore, Lee Hee-ho has sent opening speeches to the first American conference in Los Angeles in 1999,⁵³ to the first International Gathering of Adopted Koreans in Washington D.C. at the same year,⁵⁴ to G.O.A.L's first and second con-

ferences in Korea in 1999 and 2000,⁵⁵ and to the second International Gathering of Adopted Koreans in Oslo in 2001,⁵⁶ always emphasizing the importance of building a network to strengthen the solidarity among adopted Koreans.

Summary

Summing up, it has to be said that president Kim Dae Jung and the First Lady Lee Hee-ho have together displayed a noteworthy commitment to the adoption issue and the adopted Ko-reans. With a personal interest going back to the 1980s, the president's main contribution that has already gone down to history is his official apology from October of 1998, while the First Lady has been an open and active supporter of the adopted Korean community. Through their acts and deeds, the presidential couple has managed to increase the awareness of the adoption issue among the Korean people. Their political engagement for the sake of children has even showed to go beyond the borders of their own country.

In 2001, president Kim appeared in a UNICEF television ad appealing for efforts to protect the rights of children,⁵⁷ Korea chaired the Special United Nations Session on Children held in New York in May of 2002 where Lee Hee-ho delivered a keynote speech,⁵⁸ and from May 20 to June 3 a World Festival for Children was arranged as a part of the 2002 FIFA World Cup.⁵⁹ Lee Hee-ho's work for advancing the rights of children has been appreciated internationally, and in 2001 the Pearl S. Buck Foundation, named after the Nobel Prize winner in literature, choose to elect her as the Woman of the Year.⁶⁰

¹ As Korea's constitution does not allow a presidential re-election.

² The adopted son Lee In-su was present together with the Austrian wife Francisca Donner when the former president Yi passed away in exile in Honolulu, Hawaii, in 1965. Gab-je Cho & Dong-wook Lee, "An opening up. The death of Syngman Rhee", *Digital Chosun* 8/11 1999.

³ Youn-Taek Tahk, "Intercountry adoption program in Korea. Policy, law and service", in René Hoksbergen (ed.), *Adoption in worldwide perspective. A review of programs, policies and legislation in 14 countries*, Berwyn & Lisse, 1986, 79-92.

⁴ Cited by Robert Whymant in "Baby-snatching", *The Guardian* 20/6 1973.

⁵ See for example "Nordkoreanska rykten hejdar svensk adoption" [North Korean rumours creates hinders for Swedish adoption], *Dagens Nyheter* 7/1 1971.

⁶ Tahk (1986).

⁷ Bo Gunnarsson, "Anka eller jippo? Sydkorea bjuder på gratis resor" [A hoax or a gimmick? South Korea offers free travel], *Dagens Nyheter* 30/3 1976.

⁸ "First Lady attends dedication of Holt school for handicapped", *Korea Newsreview* 18/12 1982.

⁹ Young Sam Kim, Korea's quest for reform and globalization: Selected speeches of president Kim Young Sam, Seoul, 1995, 273.

¹⁰ Kyung-soo Chun, "Policy for five million overseas Koreans", *Korea Focus* 2:6 (1994), 59-65. Among the nearly 5 million overseas Koreans excluding adoptees 2 million are to be found in China, 1

million in the U.S and Canada, 800,000 in Japan, 500,000 in Central Asia and Russia, 100,000 in Latin America, 65,000 in Europe, 60,000 in Oceania, 40,000 in South East Asia and the rest in the Middle East and Africa.

¹¹ "93 hanminjokch ´ukchôn kibongyêhoek hwagchông" [Confirmation of the planning of a Korean Ethnic Festival in 1993], *Joongang Ilbo* 20/11 1992.

¹² "Gov't scholarship due for overseas Koreans", Korea Newsreview 21/12 1996.

¹³ Shi-yong Chon, "Kim stresses 'quality of life'", Korea Newsreview 1/4 1995.

¹⁴ "Sahoebokjisisôl" [Social welfare facilities], Joongang Ilbo 5/5 1994.

¹⁵ Nak-yôn Yi, "DJga tûtki sirôhanûn mal" [What Kim Dae Jung doesn´t like to hear], *Dong-A Ilbo* 5/5 1994.

¹⁶ See Kim Dae Jung's autobiography *Tasi saeroun sijagûl wihayô. Saranghanûn chôlmûniwa chongyônghanûn kungmindûrege pach'inûn iyagi.* [For a new beginning. A story dedicated to young persons and respected citizens], Seoul, 1998, *Kim Dae Jung. President of the Republic of Korea*, Korean Information Service, 2000, and "Honored on the world's stage. President Kim is awarded as human rights crusader", *Korea Newsreview* 16/12 2000.

¹⁷ John Kie-chiang Oh, "Kim Dae-jung and a populist (tonghak) origin of Korean democracy", *TKS Quarterly* Spring/2001: http://www.koreasociety.org/TKSQ/FeatureArticles/SPRING2001_JO.htm

¹⁸ See the First Lady's autobiograhy Hee-ho Lee, *My love, my country*, Los Angeles, 2000.

¹⁹ Dae Jung Kim, *Brev från fängelset* [Letters from prison], Stockholm, 1999, 239.

²⁰ Ibid., 240.

²¹ "Sûwoêdênêsô man´na ibyangyôsông" [A meeting with a female adoptee in Sweden], *Dong-A Ilbo* 13/2 1994.

²² "Kim taet'ongnyông kiôghanûn Lêna Kim" [President Kim remembers Lena Kim], *Kookmin Ilbo*5/11 2000.

²³ Lena-Kim Arctaedius-Svenungsson, "Kim Dae-Jung", Um & Yang 3:3 (1994), 9.

²⁴ Min-sôk Kim, Hun Ch´oe & Yông-jong Yi, "T´ongilmunjê jônmungagûp songgot´chilmun" [The urgency of finding a specialist on the unification question is the drill question], *Joongang Ilbo* 18/3 1998, and Ki-yông Kim, "Tangchôk it´al. Kôguk naegak sanggakhaebon chôk opta" [I have never thought about leaving the party, the united front or the cabinet], *Sindong-A* 11/2001.

²⁵ Shi-yong Chon, "Kim and Swedish-Korean adoptee share tearful reunion in better times", *Korea Herald* 24/10 1998, and Ki-ch´ôl Sông, "Kim taet´ongnyông 'Haeoeibyanga' ch´och´ông mogukûi chông nanuô" [President Kim invites overseas adoptees and shares the affection of the motherland], *Kookmin Ilbo* 24/10 1998.

²⁶ Letter from president Kim Dae Jung to Lena-Kim Arctaedius-Svenungsson dated the 11th of January 2001.

²⁷ Paul Carlson, "Seoul symposium addresses adoptees", *Home away from home* Fall/1998, 1.-2.

²⁸ Hye-son Shin, "Center for returning adoptees opens in Seoul", Korea Herald 2/7 1999.

²⁹ "Kim Taet'ongryông 'Pôbmubusô ichunggukchôk hôyong ib'bôbchung" [President Kim promsises to legislate on the dual nationality bill in the Ministry of Justice], *Dong-A Ilbo* 11/8 1998, and "O'seas Koreans to be granted voting rights", *Korea Newsreview* 29/8 1998. After fierce protests from China and Russia, the law actually had to exclude the Koreans living in those two countries plus the Koreans in Japan as the law in its final version only included those who had emigrated after the establishment of South Korea 1948.

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³¹ Yoon-bae, "New approach needed on foreign adoption", Korea Times 10/3 2000.

³² "Health ministry seeks to boost adoption of the handicapped", *Digital Chosun* 9/1 2002.

³³ Kirsten Lovelock, "Intercountry adoption as a migratory practice: A comparative analysis of intercountry adoption and immigration policy and practice in the United States, Canada and New Zealand in the post W.W.II period", *International Migration Review* 34 (Fall 2000), 907-49.

³⁴ Peter Selman, "The demographic history of intercountry adoption", in Peter Selman (ed.): *Intercountry adoption. Developments, trends and perspectives*, London, 2000.

³⁵ Dani Isaac Meier, "Why Minnesota" (2000-11-21):

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³⁶ "President Kim Dae-jungs tal i Blå huset den 23 oktober 1998" [President Kim Dae Jung´s apology in the Blue House on the 23rd of October 1998], *Um & Yang* 8:1 (1999), 21-22.

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³⁸ Pong-sôn Kim & Jin-gu Kang, "ASEM Seoul 2000", *Kyunghyang Sinmun* 20/10 2000.

³⁹ Jin-guk Kim, "Norûuêi ibyang yôgijaûi 'kamdong" [A female adoptee and journalist creates a sensation], *Joongang Ilbo* 11/12 2000. ⁴⁰ Shi-yong Chon, "Kim wraps up Sweden visit by meeting fellow Nobel laureates", *Korea Herald* 14/12 2000.

⁴¹ Per Mortensen, "Lena Kim väckte adoptionsfråga" [Lena Kim highlighted the adoption issue], *Dagens Nyheter* 14/12 2001.

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⁴³ Kyông-hwan Han, "Yurôp hangukibyangch´ôngnyôndûl hanjariê" [Young adopted Koreans in Europe in one place], *Joongang Ilbo* 10/7 1995.

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⁵² Jin-hong Kim, "Yi Hûi-ho yôsa, Chaemi'ibyangin" [The First Lady Lee Hee-ho and adopted Koreans from the U.S.], *Kookmin Ilbo* 9/7 2000.

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⁵⁴ Eugene (1999), 3.

⁵⁵ Chông Min, "Yi Hûi-ho yôsa insamal" [The First Lady Lee Hee-ho's opening speech], *Kookmin Ilbo* 6/8 2000.

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⁵⁷ "Kim appear in Unicef TV ad for children", *Korea Now* 5/5 2001.

⁵⁸ "'A world fit for children'. First Lady delivers speech at U.N. conference on children", *Korea Now* 18/5 2001.

⁵⁹ See the homepage of the festival http://www.peacepower.or.kr

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