Adopted Koreans and the development of identity in the 'third space'

Since 1953, 150,000 Korean children have been adopted to 15 main host countries in the West. They constitute the largest international adoptee group worldwide. An adopted Korean movement has existed on an international level since the 1990s and is today trying to formulate an identity and community of its own beyond Western adoption ideology and Korean nationalism. **Tobias Hübinette** outlines the history of international adoption from Korea, Western and Korean perspectives on international adoption and adopted Koreans, and the emergence of an adopted Korean identity transcending race, citizenship, culture, religion and language in what he terms as the 'third space'.

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Introduction

Since decolonisation and the post-modern era, studies of ethnicity, nationalism and diaspora have received much attention in the fields of social science and the humanities. These three topics of study have come together in the concept of transnationalism (Basch *et al*, 1994). A transnational migration or diaspora locates itself in the psycho-social space between the homeland and the host country to create room for identities and practices which transcend borders. The model of transnationalism as a way of understanding the dynamics between a diaspora, its homeland and the host country has been applied to numerous ethnic groups.

However, one group is largely absent in today's migration and diaspora studies: international adoptees. With the concept of transnationalism as the point of departure and the use of post-colonial theory, I will here discuss the case of adopted Koreans. After presenting a historical background and demographic overview, I will examine Western views on international adoption and the Korean perspective reflected in that country's diaspora politics. Finally, I will discuss the emergence of an adopted Korean movement and the identity and community of adopted Koreans.

International adoption from Korea

It is common knowledge that adoption as a practice and legal institution is present in every country and culture in the world. Furthermore, children have been transferred between countries and cultures for various reasons since time immemorial, especially during periods of war. International adoption in its current sense, meaning the movement of predominantly non-white children from developing countries to white adoptive parents in Western countries, is perceived by most people to have been initiated on a larger scale after the Korean War.

From a historical perspective, close parallels to international adoption in the history of child migration would be the 130,000 children who were shipped from the British Isles to populate the Empire between 1618 and 1967, and the 100,000 US children who were transported by the 'orphan train' from the East Coast to substitute parents in the Midwest between 1854 and 1929 (Bean and Melville, 1989; Holt MI, 1992).

In their study of children as refugees, Ressler and colleagues (1988) traced international adoption's modern predecessors back to the First World War when Armenian children who had survived the massacres in the Ottoman Empire were moved to Greece and Russia. At the same time, as many as 24,000 children of war from the disintegrating empires of Austria-Hungary, Russia and Germany were transferred to Great Britain, Switzerland, the Netherlands and the Nordic countries under the supervision of the then newly established organisation of Save the Children.

During the inter-war years, again according to Ressler *et al*, 30,000 Spanish children were relocated to institutions and substitute parents in France, Latin

Years	Number	Abandoned	Poor family	Illegitimate
1958–60	2,532	1,675	630	227
1961–70	7,275	4,013	1,958	1,304
1971–80	48,247	17,260	13,360	17,627
1981–90	65,321	6,769	11,399	47,153
1991–2000	22,129	225	1,444	20,460
2001	2,436	1	1	2,434
Total	147,940	29,943	28,792	89,205
Years	Number	Male	Biracial	Disabled
1958–60	2,532	734	1,159	1,588
1961–70	7,275	2,254	2,659	2,064
1971–80	48,247	17,320	n.a.	4,598
1981–90	65,321	30,460	n.a.	16,378
1991–2000	22,129	12,009	n.a.	8,987
2001	2,436	1,364	n.a.	743
Total	147,940	64,141	3,818	34,358

Source: Ministry of Health and Welfare (2002)

America and the Soviet Union at the time of the Spanish Civil War. The same process was reiterated in relation to the Second World War when 20,000 Jewish children from Nazi-dominated Central Europe were brought to England and other Western European countries, and 70,000 Finnish children were moved temporarily to Sweden, of whom 10,000 stayed to become adopted and foster children. Finally, at the end of the war children from China, Eastern Europe, Germany, Italy and Japan, many fathered by US soldiers, were transferred to the United States.

In the early 1950s, the Korean War resulted in a complete disruption of the traditional society, a partition of the country and something close to genocide, with 3.5–4 million Koreans being killed on both sides. This represented ten to 15 per cent of the entire population (Halliday and Cumings, 1988). Naturally, the children of Korea suffered enormously as armies marched back and forth across the small peninsula and ravaged the country while Seoul changed hands four times, causing tremendous destruction.[1]

Already during the war, orphans were taken care of by Western soldiers. When it ended an unknown number of those children ended up as adoptees, primarily in North America accompanied by home-coming soldiers and officers as adoptive parents. In 1954, the Korean government set up a child placement service for the purpose of providing international adoption of Korean children to the USA and other Western countries that had participated on the South Korean side in the war (Tahk, 1986).

In 1956, the US farmer Harry Holt, who himself had adopted eight biracial children from Korea, founded the adoption agency which still bears his name. This rapidly developed to become both Korea's and the world's dominating organisation in the field of international adoption, placing half of the adoptions from Korea and altogether more than 100,000 children from different 'Third World' countries (Holt B, 1992). As both Tahk and Holt underline, the majority of the first adoptees were biracial products of continuous US military presence and considered by Korea itself as unfit for a country perceiving itself to be racially homogenous. The issue of biracial children was the key factor in the initiation of international adoption from Korea, though full Korean children started to dominate from the 1970s (see Table 1).

During the period 1961–87, South Korea was industrialised at a furious speed under the harsh military regimes of Park Chung Hee (1961–79) and Chun Doo Hwan (1981–87), who used abortion, sterilisation and emigration as well as international adoption to decrease the numbers in an over-populated country and to avoid costly institutional care (Lee, 1989). In 1961, a special adoption law was passed creating a framework for the most effective adoption industry, unsurpassed in the world. It consisted of four

[1] The Korean War is considered one of the bloodiest in history considering the limitation in time and in geography, and the losses correspond to one-fifth of the global war casualties since the Second World War.

privately run agencies in 'healthy competition' with each other, speedy procedures and logistics, and above all a secure guarantee for young and healthy babies (Sarri *et al*, 1998). The children were mainly born out of wedlock, relinquished and declared foundlings in the brutal turmoil of urbanisation and modernisation.

At the beginning of the 1970s, adoption became an issue in the struggle for legitimacy waged between the two Koreas. North Korea accused its southern neighbour of selling Korean offspring for profit to Westerners as an appalling example of so-called 'flunkeyism' (*sadaejuûi*), the opposite attitude being the state ideology of self-reliance (*chujê*), and claimed that the south had nothing else to export but its children (Park, 1995). The negative attention led to several panic-stricken temporary halts to international adoption and the promotion of domestic adoption, while the adoption programme was transformed into a state secret as its numbers were classified. However, the middle of the 1980s saw international adoption peaking, with almost 9,000 adoptions a year, representing an astonishing one per cent of the country's annual live births. The 1980s also showed the highest emigration movement from Korea to almost the same Western countries affected by international adoption (Yoon, 2001).

The 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul marked the symbolic breakthrough for a democratic and industrialised South Korea, and had an enormous impact on bringing the country international recognition. Journalists from all over the world suddenly started to write about Korea, which, for many years, had been just another one among the many poor countries and military dictatorships of the Third World. However, Western media also scrutinised Korea's adoption programme, which was highlighted as a blatant trade in human beings. The US journal, *The Progressive*, opened one edition by publishing an investigative feature story entitled 'Babies for sale', portraying Korea as a country dealing with business in children bringing in an estimated US $15 to 20 million per year (Rothschild, 1988).

Leading Western newspapers like *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Washington Post* all extensively covered international adoption from Korea. In addition, Korean journalists soon followed by assigning to their own country the humiliating and shameful appellation of the 'orphan-exporting country' (*koasuch'ulguk*). All of a sudden, previously classified statistics revealing the whole scope of the migration of Korean children were published for the first time and government officials, who for a long time had refused to grant interviews on this sensitive subject, felt themselves forced to speak out. Thus, as a result of massive public exposure, after decades of relative silence the Korean adoption issue was born and is today a part of the country's political agenda as well as a recurring subject in media and popular culture.

Since 1988, conscious attempts have been made to decrease the numbers going abroad annually in favour of domestic adoption and foster care, with the goal of phasing out international adoption in the long run, but even today more than 2,000 children still leave the country every year. Thus, after half a century, international adoption is still used by Korea as an easy way of getting rid of unwanted children, whether stigmatised by race, by disability or by illegitimacy, even though the country is now part of the industrialised world, both with a falling birth rate and an unbalanced sex ratio.

Official statistics from the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare (2002) show that about 150,000 international adoptions took place between 1953 and 2001. After 1945 Korea provided one-third of all placements worldwide (Selman, 2002) and was uncontested as the leading supply country in the world from 1956 to 1994 when it was replaced by China and Russia.

Reflecting the policies of the Korean government and adoption agencies, those countries which sided with the South in the war and continued to be important allies have taken the greatest numbers: the USA, Norway and Sweden, from the 1950s; Denmark, Canada, France,

Destination by country 1953–2001

Main countries 1953–2001	Number
United States (1953–2001)	99,061
France (1968–2001)	10,923
Sweden (1957–2001)	8,622
Denmark (1965–2001)	8,417
Norway (1956–2001)	5,806
Netherlands (1969–2001)	4,056
Belgium (1969–1995)	3,697
Australia (1969–2001)	2,837
Germany (1965–1996)	2,351
Canada (1967–2001)	1,543
Switzerland (1968–1997)	1,111

Source: Ministry of Health and Welfare (2002)

Australia, Belgium and the Netherlands from the 1960s.

Two-thirds of children ended up in the United States, constituting ten per cent of the whole Korean-American population. The main reasons were demographic demand factors and Korea's semi-colonial status in the US world order. The adoptees, victims of a combination of Korean patriarchy and US imperialism, can be seen as physical reminders of the huge power imbalance in the relationship between the two countries (Yoon, 2001).

The 45,855 adopted Koreans in Europe represent one out of three of all international adoptees on the continent. France is the leading country with about 11,000 individuals, but large numbers have been placed in Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Scandinavia. Koreans constitute half of all international adoptees in Denmark and Norway and one-fifth in Sweden. Besides being the largest East Asian minority, they totally dominate the ethnic Korean presence in the region as there are few Korean immigrants living there (Hübinette, 2002).[2] Finally, there are altogether 5,000 adopted Koreans in Canada, Australia and New Zealand where they again make up a substantial part of the international adoptees in those countries.

Western neo-colonialism
Since its beginning after World War II, when the supply of working-class children for domestic adoption started to run short, international adoption has been the last resort for infertile couples to have a child. They felt strong social pressures to fulfil the standard of the nuclear family. The practice was widely perceived as a progressive and anti-racist act of rescuing a non-white child from the miseries of the 'Third World', something which legitimises the practice in the first place (Ngabonziza, 1991).

I argue that the continuous presence of international adoption after formal de-colonisation reminds us of how colonialism cannot be limited to territorial control belonging to the classical colonial period, but must be seen as a wider set of relations of domination and subordination according to the dynamic between a core and a periphery. The very concept of post-coloniality and its ambivalent association as a state of an infinite aftermath has also been problemised by Childs and Williams (1997) in their introduction to post-colonial theory.

Continuous international adoption from Korea can thus be seen as a manifest symbol of Western dependency and the country's position as a client state in the world system, pointing to the persistence of colonial thinking and reflecting global racial hierarchies. It is also worth noting that many leading supply countries in the field of international adoption fall under the US sphere of influence or have been subjected to US warfare: Korea, Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines in Asia, and Colombia, Chile and Guatemala in Latin America.

While writing on the collecting of primitive art, Sally Price (1989) has noted the similarities of colonial desires and rescue fantasies between her own objects of study and international adoptees:

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[2] Sweden, with its 45,000 international adoptees from 130 different countries, is in absolute numbers the second biggest adoption country after the USA and in relation to its population of barely nine million inhabitants proportionally the leading adopting nation in the world.

Once rescued from their homes among . . . the elements, the objects come into the protective custody of Western owners, something like orphans . . . where they are loved and appreciated. (p 145)[3]

Other critics of international adoption, with its delicate mixture of race, class and gender issues, have concentrated upon the commodification of children from exoticised countries and the obsession with the racialised other that is flourishing on the adoption market – an obsession driven by insatiable consumer demand and cynical profit-making, the blatant exploitation of young and unwed women from poor backgrounds, and the ugly parallels to contemporary trafficking of women and the historic transatlantic slave trade (Herrmann Jr and Kasper, 1992; Triseliotis, 2000; Masson, 2001; Shiu, 2001).

Governed by left-liberalism, the dominant Western view on international adoption has been designated as the 'liberal paradigm' by Kirton (2000). Its clear message is that life in the West is best, and that people in the West have the right to adopt children from non-Western countries in the name of paternalistic humanism and developmental thinking, something that resembles the arguments of the pro-slavery movement in the USA, which maintained that when moved to the New World, the actual material situation of the Africans was unquestionably greatly bettered (Tise, 1987). The unequal situation is loaded with demands of loyalty, guilt and gratitude as the wealthiest of the rich in the receiving countries adopt the most shunned and unwanted in the 'Third World'.

Kirton calls the opposing view the 'black radical paradigm', coming from black minority spokespeople in the USA and the UK, and mostly heard in the discussion on transracial domestic adoption, which instead puts great emphasis on the child's ethnic origin (Courtney, 1997). Oddly enough, this discussion has rarely reached the world of international

adoption. Instead it is assumed that there are no special problems, or emotional or psychological costs in being a non-white adoptee in a white adoptive family and living in a predominantly white environment. Consequently, assimilation becomes the ideal as the adoptee is stripped of name, language, religion and culture, only retaining a fetishised non-white body, while the bonds to the biological family and the country of origin are cut off.

Korean diaspora politics
The Korean perspective is one of a supplying country that has sent away the largest number of its citizens for international adoption in modern times. The subject of international adoption is treated there like a national trauma, a source of shame and humiliation and a painful reminder of the country's dependency on the West. Furthermore, since the end of the 1980s when overseas adoption became a societal issue, adopted Koreans have been treated as a diaspora of Korean ethnicity and are seen as a part of a worldwide Korean community. To understand this view, the adopted Koreans must be linked to a tradition of displacement and dispersal of ethnic Koreans and to contemporary Korean diaspora politics.

Modern emigration from Korea started in 1860, peaked during the colonial period and continued through the authoritarian regimes, creating a diaspora which today numbers 4.5 million people: two million in China, one million in the USA, 700,000 in Japan, 500,000 in Central Asia, 150,000 adopted Koreans and tens of thousands of others spread across Canada, Russia, Latin America, Southeast Asia and Europe (Lee, 2000).

In 1995, president Kim Young Sam (1993–97) launched his policy of globalisation (*segyêhwa*). One way to achieve this is to reconnect with the overseas Koreans who are officially defined as assets for the country (Chung, 2000). After the end of the Cold War, the industrialised South Korean democracy could

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[3] Others have compared international adoptees to exotic mascots or pets, and the so-called 'house negroes' in America and the 'court negroes' in Europe must be the closest parallels to international adoptees in history.

afford to acknowledge the existence not only of a second Korean state, but of many diverse and deterritorialised Korean communities around the world, including adopted Koreans.

In 1997, the Overseas Koreans Foundation was inaugurated as the central authority responsible for creating a global Korean community encompassing South and North Koreans, and overseas and adopted Koreans, as a way of overcoming the division of the country, keeping together the widely dispersed populations of Korean ethnicity and benefiting from westernised overseas Koreans as intermediaries for economic expansion and investment. Finally in 1999, a dual citizenship was introduced for overseas Koreans, including adoptees, provided they were at least one-quarter Korean.

The Korean form of globalisation by embracing overseas Koreans through diaspora politics reached new heights during the presidency of Kim Dae Jung (1998–2002). President Kim showed a remarkable interest in the adoption issue as a part of his political agenda (Hübinette, 2001). In 1998, during his first presidential year, he invited 29 adopted Koreans from eight different countries to a meeting in the Blue House, the presidential residence in Seoul, where on behalf of the country and the government he delivered a moving apology for the sending away of 150,000 Korean children.

However, the Korean view is as unsatisfactory for explaining the situation of adopted Koreans as Western adoption ideology. By automatically including adopted Koreans as an integrated part of a global Korean community, the Korean government ignores the fact that the group would not be considered as an ethnic group or a diaspora in the classical Western sense because they lack everything from a common language to any traces of endogamy or a myth of a homeland. Furthermore, the fact that the adopted Koreans have lived most of their lives in a non-Korean setting is simply overlooked.

Song (1999) has examined the Korean narrative on adopted Koreans in his study of nationalism in Korea. This narrative, mainly coming from progressive circles and prevalent in popular culture, states that international adoption is a crime and that adoptive parents are abusive and racist. However, according to Song's interpretation, the actual source of these statements can be found in uneasy feelings of belonging to a country which, despite democratisation and increasing prosperity, has not been able to take up responsibility for children who are either racially impure, born with a disability or in circumstances regarded as embarrassing, in spite of the nationalist rhetoric of the nation-as-family.

Another example is Kim's (2003) paper on visiting programmes for adopted Koreans organised by the Korean government. Participating as an anthropologist, Kim followed a group of adopted Koreans taking part in the Overseas Koreans Foundation's summer programme of 2001. Kim shows how essentialist Korean narratives clash with the adoptees' own self-images, causing frustration, alienation and even active resistance as the adult participants start to question the paternalistic treatment coming from the organisers.

The adopted Korean movement
In 1986 the first organised group of adopted Koreans was formed in Sweden – the Adopted Koreans' Association (*Adopterade Koreaners Förening*). The Swedish example was followed by others, and today there are equivalent associations in almost every country or region affected by adoption from Korea. They organise a wide range of activities, giving out journals and publications, having homepages and list servers, and holding conferences and events.

Transnational groupings began in 1994 when the Euro-Korean Network was founded by adopted Koreans in Europe with support from the Korean community in Germany. In 1999, the first International Gathering of Adult Adopted Koreans was held in Washington DC. A second meeting took place two years later in Oslo, Norway, and the third is being planned for 2004 in Seoul. In addition, there are several internet-based groups with their own homepages, electronic newsletters and list servers pointing to the

fact that the adopted Korean movement is very much a virtual community. Finally, a growing number of adopted Koreans who have re-settled in Korea established Global Overseas Adoptees' Link in 1998.

Meier (1998) has examined how adopted Koreans are continuously negotiating their racial and ethnic identity. Kim (2000), writing on the adopted Korean movement, has focused on the remarkable artistic and creative output stemming from its own writers and poets, painters, filmmakers and photographers, musicians, singers and other artists. Anthologies have been praised by critics, two novels have become bestsellers in Sweden and the United States respectively (as well as being translated into Korean) and documentaries have been broadcast nationwide and received prestigious prizes (Trotzig, 1996; Bishoff and Rankin, 1997; Borshay Liem, 2000; Robinson, 2002). Finally, adopted Koreans in academia have started to write studies where adult adopted Koreans are, for the first time, considered active agents capable of creating their own spaces and expressing their own voices instead of just being silenced and made the invisible objects of Korea's adoption programme, or grateful and easily assimilated children of Western elite families (Des Jardins, 1996; Bergquist, 2000; Traver, 2000; Lieberman, 2001).

An identity in the 'third space'
Summing up, if both Western and Korean interpretations and images of adopted Koreans appear to have their obvious shortcomings, what constitutes the identity and community of adopted Koreans? Dashefsky's (1975) classical model of identity construction focuses on two aspects: an objective side made up of society's norms and values and a subjective side consisting of an individual's self-perception. For an adopted Korean, those two aspects clash violently in a Western society, being Korean by race but Western by culture. Parallels exist with mixed-race people who, in their in-betweenness, are as hard to define for nation states, as has been shown by Aspinall (2003) in his examination of how biracial people are categorised in the censuses of the USA and the UK. However, an important

difference is that mixed-race people are bicultural while international adoptees have been socialised monoculturally, in spite of the rhetoric of 'rainbow families'.

Adopted Koreans are not an easily defined group and cannot be compared either to other diasporised Koreans, who feel a natural bond to the homeland and to other countrypeople in exile, or to the transnational networks created by Haitians and Filipinos in the USA, which Basch and colleagues (1994) examined when theorising transnationalism. Nor do the adopted Koreans fit into Hall's (1990) model of hybridity applied to the African diaspora, which presupposes existing territorialised communities no matter how diverse they may be.

However, I argue that the adopted Koreans fit well into Cohen's (1997) category of a 'victim diaspora' defined as an involuntary displacement caused by catastrophic and traumatic events, namely international adoption. I am thus equating the adopted Koreans with such generic and classical diasporas as the Jewish (severe persecution), the African (forcible transferral), the Irish (mass poverty) and the Armenian (genocidal experience) ones. The same argument has been made by Miller-Loessi and Kilic (2001) in their paper on adopted Chinese and their adoptive families, seen as a unique diaspora, and by Williams (2001) who has dealt with the adopted Vietnamese diaspora.

Adopted Koreans are for me truly a unique group transgressing categories of race, citizenship, language, religion and culture. Many of the first adopted Koreans are of mixed race, while the group is spread across 15 main host countries speaking different languages and belonging to a variety of different host cultures and religions. The only shared aspects are a history of being born in Korea, and having been adopted and grown up in a Western country. The adopted Korean movement does not even possess a common self-designating term as some call themselves Korean adoptees, others overseas Korean adoptees, Korean overseas adoptees or simply adopted Koreans. To be able to fully grasp the situation of adopted Koreans, I suggest that post-colonial theory may provide the answer.

Post-colonial theory seeks to disrupt the eternal binaries of Western philosophy and open up to spaces where new conditions are acknowledged and made possible. One of the leading post-colonial theorists, Homi Bhabha (1994), has developed the concept of 'third space' which he describes as the space where culture has no unity, purity or fixity, and where primordial notions of race and nation have been replaced by a floating and hybrid existence. As has been suggested, Bhabha may have thought about the situation of himself and other 'Third World' intellectuals living in the West. However, for me it is adopted Koreans, with all their differences and commonalities taken together, who provide a perfect example of such an existence in the third space between their birth country's utopian dream of a global ethnic Korean community, where the adoptees are essentialised as Korean brethren, and a Western culture demanding assimilation and loyalty.

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