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Power, Resistance, and Subjectivity:  
An Exploration of Overseas Korean Adoptees in Korea

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Asian Languages and Cultures

by

Andrea Kim Cavicchi

2016

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Power, Resistance, and Subjectivity:  
An Exploration of Overseas Korean Adoptees in Korea

by

Andrea Kim Cavicchi

Doctor of Philosophy in Asian Languages and Cultures

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Namhee Lee, Chair

This dissertation explores the lives and experiences of individuals who were born in Korea, adopted overseas as infants or young children, and have returned to their country of birth as adults. More specifically, I present the diverse, creative, and sometimes subtle ways in which adoptee returnees have engaged in resistance in order to reclaim their right to reside in Korea, access their personal histories, and challenge the system that produced their subjectivities as overseas Korean adoptees. Ranging from everyday practices, such as cross-cultural or linguistic code-switching, to grassroots activism and coalition building, this broad spectrum of resistance practices elucidates the ways power manifests itself in several forms in Korean society, the state, and the adoption industry. Throughout this study, I draw on the theoretical contributions of Michel Foucault, which have greatly shaped our understandings of power in its ubiquity and multi-dimensionality, and Michel de Certeau's concepts of strategies, tactics, and resistance

against power in daily life practices. I approach the interactions of power and resistance as inherently dynamic, open-ended, unpredictable, and constantly shifting rather than assume direct causation or the necessary presence of intention or consciousness. I argue that all these practices, including the act of return to a place from where these adoptee returnees were adopted away in previous decades, signify resistance against existing systems of power.

In an attempt to disrupt conventional narratives of adoption, this study aims to focus the discussion on those who have been directly affected by Korea's inadequate social welfare system and the institution of overseas adoption: adoptees, families of origin, single mother families, and other vulnerable members of Korean society. Broken down into an introduction, three main chapters, and a conclusion, this study is an ethnography that conceptualizes power and resistance through narratives. I present a historical overview of adoption practices in Korea starting from the mid- and late Chosŏn dynasty and continuing up to current overseas and domestic adoption practices. Additionally, I situate the return of Korean adoptees to Korea and their everyday practices and modes of consumption within the history of overseas Korean adoption. Next, I focus on original family search and reunion among adoptees, which includes a debate surrounding access to adoption records and personal histories. The discussion then shifts to a coalition that has formed among adult adoptee returnees, unwed and single mothers, original Korean family members who have been separated from a child or children through Korean adoption practices, a Korean pastor and his wife who run an adoptee guesthouse in Seoul, and other allies, highlighting their mobilization strategies and political activism. Finally, I consider how utilizing a social justice and human rights framework facilitates a more holistic understanding of the history of Korean adoption and the lives that have been directly affected by adoption practices.

The dissertation of Andrea Kim Cavicchi is approved.

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University of California, Los Angeles

2016

This dissertation is dedicated to

My parents for giving me love and support,  
My Korean mother for giving me life and inspiration,  
and all those who so graciously shared their stories with me.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Introduction

On Saturday, February 23, 2014, approximately fifty organizers gathered at Hongdae Children’s Park in Seoul, Korea<sup>1</sup> to mourn the death of Hyunsu O’Callaghan, a three-year old Korean boy adopted by an American couple in 2013. Initial media reports of Hyunsu’s death and the first-degree murder and child abuse charges against his adoptive father led to even



Image 1.1: Hyunsu’s memorial at Hongdae Children’s Park, Seoul, Korea (2014)

greater media coverage, sparking immediate outrage among many in Korea and prompting the organization of this memorial. In addition to the memorial’s organizers, this service attracted hundreds of passersby, many of whom stopped to speak with the memorial organizers and read leaflets that explained the context of the memorial service in both English and Korean. A bucket of white flowers was also provided at the memorial service for anyone to take and place on the table next to a number of children’s toys and Hyunsu’s framed portrait. To the right of Hyunsu’s portrait hung a large banner that read in Korean, “Sorry Hyunsu for not being able to protect you” (*Hyönsuya chik’yöjuji mot’ae mianhae*).

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “Korea” to refer to the Republic of Korea (South Korea) throughout this paper.

Any event memorializing a life tragically cut short is important. Though even more striking was the expression of solidarity demonstrated by this memorial service's organizers:

Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoptee Community of Korea (TRACK) and Adoptee



Image 1.2: Portrait of Hyunsu at Hyunsu's memorial (2014)

Solidarity Korea (ASK), two activist organizations led by adult Korean adoptee returnees; KoRoot, a guesthouse and NGO run by Koreans for Korean adult adoptee returnees; Korean Unwed Mothers and Families Association (KUMFA), a grassroots organization of Korean unwed mothers<sup>2</sup> and their children; Mindeullae, a support network for original families<sup>3</sup> who have been separated from a child or children through Korean adoption practice; and Korean Unwed Mothers Support Network (KUMSN), a Korean public corporation that engages in academic research and public relations activities related to single mother families in

Korea. Although diverse in their backgrounds and missions, each of these organizations agreed on one thing: that the practices of adoption agencies, particularly those of Holt Adoption Agency, the agency through which Hyunsu was adopted, have not adhered to the legal and ethical standards specified by Korea's Special Adoption Law, and reforms in adoption practice need to be made immediately in order to comply with these standards. In concurrence with this event, individuals from these organizations staged multiple protests in other locations in Seoul

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<sup>2</sup> Unwed mother, the preferred term of unwed mother activists, refers to women who have children outside of marriage. The term single mother describes all mothers who are single, including unwed mothers, divorced mothers, widowed mothers, etc.

<sup>3</sup> The terms original families, original mother, etc., as opposed to birth families, are commonly used by academics and adoptee rights advocates. This deliberate naming indicates a shift away from "positive adoption language," which, they argue, reduces original mothers to incubators or breeders. "First families" is another preferred term.



throughout the week leading up to and after the memorial. During their protests outside of the National Assembly building, these activists called for the Ministry of Health and Welfare to launch a special audit of Holt. While protesting in front of the main Holt office, they demanded that Holt, first and foremost, exhaust all efforts to promote the preservation of Korean families, and secondly, children be placed in safe and suitable adoptive homes.

The formation of this coalition and this event is just one example of how adult adoptee returnees engage in resistance in Korea. I examine a broad spectrum of resistance practices performed by adoptee returnees, ranging from those of a political and action-oriented nature, such as the aforementioned example, to individual, less visible, “everyday practices.”<sup>4</sup> Drawing on the contributions of Michel Foucault, which have greatly shaped our understandings of power in its ubiquity and multi-dimensionality,<sup>5</sup> and Michel de Certeau’s concepts of strategies, tactics, and resistance against power in daily life practices,<sup>6</sup> I investigate the ways in which systems of power and control mechanisms impact on the lives of adult Korean adoptees, single and unwed mothers, and other members of Korean society who have been personally affected by overseas adoption. Additionally, I elucidate how these multiples actors through their resistance practices have undermined power and, at times, demonstrated the possibility of reconfiguring a given unjust order. An investigation into these multiple and diverse practices of resistance will elucidate the ways in which power manifests itself in several forms in Korean society, the state, and the adoption industry. This framework will be discussed in greater detail in the Theoretical Framework and Overview of Chapters sections of this chapter.

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<sup>4</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*, Translated by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> de Certeau, Michel, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

## Literature Review

Studies on overseas Korean adoption and adoptees have emerged in North America, Western Europe, and Scandinavia ever since the first wave of Korean children arrived in their Western host countries. The majority of these studies were first written in the 1970s and 1980s by scholars in the West, focusing on the development of Korean and other transnational adoptees in their host countries and the processes of assimilation and acculturation.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, these studies frequently rely on adoption agencies and adoptive parents as key informants and do not expand analysis to a global framework. The issues of race and ethnicity are treated as factors that may hamper a smooth transition in the familial and cultural integration processes. These studies posit how “Oriental” children are to best assimilate into their new adoptive families and Western cultures. How racial and ethnic differences create challenges for Caucasian adoptive parents of transracial and transnational adopted children is one of the main points of departure.

For example, Hei Sook Park Wilkinson’s study is one that falls into this category of scholarship on overseas Korean adoption and adoptees. Wilkinson, a clinical psychologist of Korean heritage who first came to America at age twenty-two to study, follows the lives of eight adopted Korean children and their Caucasian families in Michigan, USA. She positions her study as a means to assist parents and adoption specialists better understand adopted Korean children

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Bagley, “Chinese Adoptees in Britain: A Twenty Year Follow-up of Adjustment and Social Identity,” *International Social Work* 36, no. 2 (1996): 143–157; William Feigelman and Arnold R. Silverman. *Chosen Children: New Patterns of Adoptive Relationships* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1983); Dong Soo Kim, “How They Fared in American homes: A follow-up Study of Adopted Korean Children in the United States.” *Children Today*, no. 6 (1977): 2–6; Koh, Frances. *Oriental Children in American Homes* (Minneapolis, MN: East-West Press, 1981); Mike Mullen, “Cultural Identity and Place in Adult Korean-American Intercountry Adoptees,” *Adoption Quarterly*, no. 3, vol. 1 (1995): 15-48; Margaret Valk, *Adjustment of Korean-American Children in American Adoptive Homes* (New York: Child Welfare League of America, 1957); Kevin L. Wickes & John R. Slate, “Transracial Adoption of Koreans: A Preliminary Study of Adjustment.” *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, vol. 19 (1996): 187–195; Hei Sook Park Wilkinson, *Birth is More Than Once: The Inner World of Adopted Korean Children* (Bloomfield Hills: Sunrise Ventures, 1985).

and their adoption, “a legal and symbolic re-birth.”<sup>8</sup> Through her research, Wilkinson explains that adopted Korean children perceive their racial and ethnic differences marked by “Oriental features” as negative and threatening. Their desire to demonstrate identification with the United States and their adoptive families is reflected in their rejection of “Koreanness.” If properly understood and supported by the adopted parents, the adopted child has the potential to experience a “birth of self” and eventually embrace their Korean heritage. The main concern of her study, however, is to provide insight into the minds of Korean adopted children and equip adoption parents and professionals with the tools to better facilitate post-adoption adjustment. It is problematic in that adoption to the United States is the starting point, and the practice of overseas Korean adoption is treated as a one-directional process with challenges that must be overcome.

Even now, studies that explore the racial and ethnic identity formation of Korean adoptees in the United States continue to emerge.<sup>9</sup> One example is Mia Tuan and Jiannbin Lee Shiao study that considers the multiple ways Korean American adoptees self-identify and how these identities “are chosen, discarded, or revised over time.”<sup>10</sup> While Korean adoptees have options to determine how ethnicity plays out in their private lives, the authors argue that these adoptees face limitations in terms of their racial identity in the public sphere regardless of their level of acculturation into “American culture.” Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and

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<sup>8</sup> Hei Sook Park Wilkinson, 61.

<sup>9</sup> Adam J. Beaupre, Reed Reichwald, Xiang Zhou, Elizabeth Raleigh, and Richard M. Lee. “Korean Adoptee Identity: Adoptive and Ethnic Identity Profiles of Adopted Korean Americans.” *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, issue 150 (2015): 47–61; John D. Palmer, *The Dance of Identities: Korean Adoptees and Their Journey toward Empowerment* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 2010); Mia Tuan and Jiannbin Lee Shiao, *Choosing Ethnicity, Negotiating Race: Korean Adoptees in America*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press, 2011); Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin, eds. *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Tuan and Shiao, 2011, 12.

Sun Yung Shin also take race as a starting point in their anthology.<sup>11</sup> What sets this publication apart from others is that the authors' aims to provide a counter-narrative to the dominant narratives of transracial adoption by presenting the writings of adoptees themselves. The editors seek to acknowledge the multiplicity and complexity of adoption stories while exploring the intersection of race, ethnicity, nationalism, citizenship, neocolonialism, and globalization.

A number of studies produced in Korea by Korean academics approach overseas Korean adoption as a legal system or process.<sup>12</sup> As adult adoptees have become a greater visible presence in South Korea, research on the ethnic and racial development of adopted Koreans as part of the Korean diaspora have also emerged.<sup>13</sup> A number of these studies cast a critical gaze over the institution of overseas Korean adoption, and, at times, present the figure of the Korean adoptee as “*pulssanghae*” (pitiful). Those with negative adoption experiences in their host countries are often positioned as victims within the narrative of overseas Korean adoption. This casting, I argue, is linked to the lasting anxieties and mixed feelings around Korea's 20th century rapid economic development, which occurred at the expense of the women and their reproductive

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<sup>11</sup> Trenka, Oparah, and Shin, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Tai-Soon Bai, “Ibyang söbisü wa kajok ch’egye iron” [A View on Adoption Service and Family Organization] *Han’guk sahoe bokjihak* 16 (1990): 74-101; Chöng-hui Ch’oe, *Yangjapöp üi Kaejông üi Wihan Pigyo Pöpchök Yön’gu* [A Comparative Study on the Revision of Adoption Law], Ph.D. Dissertation (Seoul: Ewha Women’s University, 1993); Ki-wön Chöng and Hyön-ae An, *Kungnae Mit Kugoe Ibyang üi Hyönan Kwaje* [The Consideration Task of Domestic and Overseas Adoption] (Seoul: Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, 1994); Hu-yöng Kim, *Yangja Chedo üi Kaesön Pangan e Kwanhan Yön’gu* [A Study for Reform Measures of the Adoption System], Ph.D. Dissertation (Cheongju: Cheongju University: 1996); Hyeran Kim, “Haeoe ibyang chönmyön chungdan bangch’im chaegömt’o” [A Re-examination of the Plan for a Total Stop of Overseas Adoption]. *Hansejôngch’aek* 2 (1994): 14-20.

<sup>13</sup> Chin-suk Bae, *Chaemi Han’gukkye Ibyangindül üi Injong Minjokchök Chöngch’egam üi Hyöngsöng Kwa Pyönhöng e Kwanhan Yön’gu* [Voices of Adult Korean-born Adoptees in the U.S.: The Formation and Transformation of Their Racial and Ethnic Identities], M.A. Thesis (Seoul: Yonsei University, 2003); Mi-sön Yi, *Haeoe Ibyangin üi Simni Sahoejök Chönggung e Yönghyang üi Mich’inün Yoin e Kwanhan Yön’gu* [Research on the Factors Influencing the Psycho-social Adjustment of Overseas Adoptees], Ph.D. Dissertation (Seoul: Seoul Women’s University, 2001); Chinwöl Yu, “Isan üi Ch’ehöm Kwa Tiasüp’ora üi önö: Haeoe Ibyangin Yösöng Munhak üi Chungsim üro” [A Study on Overseas Korean Adoptee’s Literature as Experience and Language of Diaspora], *Chöngsin Munhwa Yön’gu*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2009); Kyuyong Yu, “Haeoe Ibyangin üi Chöngch’esöng Kwa üisik e Kwanhan Yön’gu” [A Study of Identity and Awareness of Overseas Adoptees], *Adong yön’gu*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2002).

rights, the working class, poor families, and other vulnerable members of society.<sup>14</sup> Korea's overseas adoption industry boomed in this era, as many were encouraged to relinquish their children to adoption in the name of national development.

Chinwŏl Yu, for example, initially frames overseas Korean adoption as the product of oppressive state authority, patriarchal ideology, and conventional family norms in Korea in her analyses of films and literary works produced by Korean adopted females.<sup>15</sup> She explores the formation of their hybrid identities through identification with an other, experiences with alienation, and criticisms surrounding their adopted selves. While Yoo does make an attempt to situate adoptee experiences within the context of Korean politics and society, experience itself becomes the main point of inquiry. Yoo explores the darker aspects of the Korean adoptee experience, positioning these adopted female as victims of larger structures and systems. However, what is evident is Yoo's criticism of overseas Korean adoption and the haunting psychological effects that adoption has had on the adopted figures whom she analyzes.

Studies published in the 2000s have taken a more historical and transnational approach, emphasizing that adoptions are not one-way journeys but unfolding processes that entail transnational movements in multiple directions.<sup>16</sup> These authors explore alternative kinds of

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<sup>14</sup> For a more in depth discussion, please see Chapter Two.

<sup>15</sup> Chinwŏl Yu, 2009; Chinwŏl Yu, "Vision of Periphery and Activism in Identity: Films by Korean Women Adoptees." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 18.2 (2012).

<sup>16</sup> Ann Anagnost, "Scenes of Misrecognition: Maternal Citizenship in the Age of Transnational Adoption," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 8, no. 2 (2000): 389-421; Sara Dorow, *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship* (New York: NYU Press, 2006); David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010); Tobias Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture* (Seoul: Jimoondang, 2006); Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016); Arissa H. Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); Soojin Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S. Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption (Difference Incorporated)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014);

kinship forged through common histories of displacements and alienations among adoptees in both the United States and Korea. Eleana Kim writes of an “adoptee kinship” that is produced through “place-making” in Seoul, the struggle for cultural citizenship in both the West and South Korea, and through community rather than consanguinity.<sup>17</sup> Yngvesson’s study addresses the practice of overseas adoption on a broader global scale and suggests the ways in which adoptive kinship may transform understandings of identity and belonging through the lived experience of adoption.<sup>18</sup> David Eng explores the processes in which race and racism are negotiated within the family and how kinship and belonging are constituted and rearticulated in relation to the state and family. He argues that transnational adoption requires a poststructuralist engagement with kinship and family that will deconstruct heteronormative and dominant white assumptions.<sup>19</sup>

Another recent trend that has emerged in Korean adoption studies is a focus on the reunions between Korean original mothers<sup>20</sup> and their adult adopted children. Hosu Kim examines the figure of original mother and their representations on Korean search-and-reunion shows.<sup>21</sup> Once erased from Korea’s official history, adoptees and their original mothers have recently been spotlighted on national television shows. The reunions between adoptees and their Korean mothers signify reconciliations of personal trauma that occurred during the mother-child

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Prébin, Elise, *Meeting Once More: The Korean Side of Transnational Adoption* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Barbara Yngvesson, *Belonging in an Adopted World: Race, Identity, and Transnational Adoption*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> E. Kim, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Yngvesson, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Eng, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> I use the terms original mother, original parents, original families, etc., as opposed to birth families, because they are more often used by academics and adoptee rights advocates. Exceptions are made in cases where I reference specific programs, such as G.O.A.’L’s Birth Family Search Department.

<sup>21</sup> Hosu Kim, “Television Mothers: Korean Birthmothers Lost and Found in the Search and Reunion Narratives,” *Cultural Studies & Critical Methodologies* 12, no. 5 (2012): 438-449.

separation. However, therein lies a greater significance: the individual subject of original mother represents the nation and its collective culture trauma, and the nation can now achieve reconciliation through this reunion. Elise Prébin also looks at these search-and-reunion shows, which as a means to relieve parents of their guilt vis-à-vis their children.<sup>22</sup> These shows normalize the practice of separation, emphasize the roles that war and post-war poverty played in the relinquishment decision, and construct a happily-ever-after ending. Despite the exploitative nature of these shows, Prébin argues that these televised meeting programs have led to a change in parents' feelings towards the children they once relinquished. In turn, this may lead to an increase in the number of original families who pursue reunion.

Although these studies emphasize the transnational nature of adoption and lasting connections to Korea, in physical or imaginary forms, only a handful focus their attention on the mechanisms of the Korean state. One example is Eleana Kim's study that explores adoptees' experiences in Korea in the context of the Korea's state-sponsored globalization project (*segye-hwa*).<sup>23</sup> Since the late 1990s, the Korean state has sought to welcome back overseas Koreans to Korea, extending an invitation to non-adopted and adopted Koreans from predominantly Western countries. The hybridity of adoptees' backgrounds, however, challenges dominant categories of race, ethnicity, and nation as embodied by Korean state politics and society. Their ambivalent status, as both family and foreigner, has led to the formation of an alternative space of belonging for the transnational adoptee community in Korea.

Tobias Hübinette's study also examines how adult Korean adoptees are positioned in

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<sup>22</sup> Elise Prébin. "Looking for 'lost' children in South Korea." *Adoption and Culture, the Interdisciplinary Journal of ASAIK (Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity and Kinship)* 2 (2009): 223-261.

<sup>23</sup> Kim, 2010.

relation to the Korean state and society.<sup>24</sup> He analyzes popular cultural representations of Korean adoptees in Korean music and film, exploring the implications of a nation that portrays itself as one extended family, yet has sent thousands of its children away for overseas adoption. With its pride in racial and ethnic homogeneity, Hübinette investigates how Korean society responds to adopted Koreans who do not fit neatly into this collective national identity. This study's most significant contribution is its critique of twentieth century Korean nationalism and how the categories of race and ethnicity function within this Korean nationalist project through the lens of overseas adopted Koreans.

While these previous studies have contributed much to our understanding of the history of overseas Korean adoption and Korean adoptees' experiences, there remain research gaps in Korean adoption studies literature. In particular, the experiences of adoptees who have returned to Korea as adults is one area that requires further investigation. Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, thousands of adult Korean adoptees, mainly those who were adopted overseas in the 1970s and 1980s, return to their birth country each year to search for birth families, teach English, study Korean, attend international Korean adoptee, and for a number of other reasons. Hundreds of adult adoptees have resettled permanently in Korea, claiming a visible space in Korean society and generating discussions about overseas Korean adoption within public discourse. Studies that investigate these adult adoptees and their experiences through the theoretical framework of a counterpublic are valid and important.<sup>25</sup> However, beyond an adoptee collective identity or adoptee kinship, this project seeks to tease out the diverse experiences and practices of adoptee returnees as they navigate systems of power in Korea.

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<sup>24</sup> Hübinette, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Kim, 2010.



## **Researcher Background**

As an overseas Korean adoptee, an advocate for adoptee rights, and someone who has worked extensively with adoptee communities in multiple roles over the years, determining how to position myself vis-à-vis my research has been both challenging and rewarding. It has been challenging to balance the demands of academia and my commitment to adoptee rights activism, community development, and social justice. It has been rewarding in that I can delve into a research area that is so personal while generating meaningful discussions about overseas Korean adoption across disciplines. Reflecting on the past decade and a half, I can see how and why my personal experiences initially drew me to issues of social justice. There was once a time, though, when I would never have imagined that I would someday be engaged in adoptee rights activism, speaking and writing Korean, and building relationships with Korean relatives whom I had never met before. It was my postcollege experiences in Korea, combined with a deep curiosity to understand the mechanisms and implications of overseas Korean adoption, which motivated me to pursue a graduate program in Korean Studies.

I was born in South Korea to a twenty-four-year-old unwed Korean mother who relinquished me at birth, and shortly thereafter, I was adopted overseas to a small town in Massachusetts. While I met a handful of Korean adoptees throughout my childhood, it was not until I moved to South Korea after my college graduation that I realized the extent of the Korean adoptee population. Upon joining adult adoptee organizations in Seoul, I was introduced to hundreds of other adult adoptees from the United States, Australia, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, and a number of other Western European countries. What we shared in common was our country of birth and overseas adoptions. Yet, our distinctly diverse backgrounds, cultural differences, and wide range of reasons for our return to Korea fascinated me. Around this time, I received a

scholarship to attend Sogang University, and I began taking Korean language classes for twenty hours per week. My determination to learn Korean was crucial for me because I realized that the key to understanding my personal history and Korean culture was mastering the language so I could effectively communicate with other people. The climax of my second year came when I finally reconnected with original family members after an emotionally exhausting ten-month search. Although the road to reconnecting with my original family has not always been easy, I realized that I was one of the “lucky” adoptees who was reunited with my Korean family.

It was also at this point that I began thinking critically about overseas Korea adoption practices. Adoption has often been framed as the inevitable and benevolent solution to the “orphan” problem in Korea. However, virtually every adoptee with whom I spoke was not an orphan. Many of us were born to unwed mothers, while many others were born into two-parent families and relinquished through circumstances of divorce, poverty, or family strife. Some of us were products of marital affairs, others were brought to orphanages by disapproving elders without our parent’s consent, and even some of us were kidnapped, lost, or abducted by our own family members. I met original mothers who relinquished their children to adoption decades ago, many of whom experienced psychological trauma due to the separation. They continue to be haunted by the shame of their past. I also met a number of unwed mothers who struggle yet are determined to raise their children in a society that is set up for them to fail. Due to their status, these women often experienced unfair termination in the workforce, and their children are bullied in school for their non-heteronormative families. My work in Korea also introduced me to economically insecure families who are told their children will have a better life through overseas adoption. They must weigh their child’s food security, financial well being, and greater educational opportunities against the loss of family, culture, and language. Once used as a

strategy to mitigate the effects of the Korean War, such as a large population of orphans and mixed-race children who were shunned by society, adoption continues to be applied as a “fix” to Korea’s socio-economic problems in the twenty-first century.

*Adoption is a social justice issue.*

I want to make one thing clear: I am not against adoption, and I acknowledge there are circumstances where adoption is the most favorable and beneficial outcome for the child. To that end, what I wish to emphasize is the importance of creating a critical dialogue that focuses attention on the social, cultural, and economic structures that create family disruption and lead to child relinquishment. It is my believe that family preservation, before adoption, should be prioritized as a response for at-risk Korean families, and the Korean state must redirect the social welfare system toward a family preservation focus.

In my aim to deconstruct the dominant narrative of adoption and frame it as a social justice issue, there were a number of pressing questions over which I reflected: What are the root causes of relinquishment among Korean families? In addition to a lack of resources, what are the other reasons original families cannot raise their children? As an economically powerful and technologically advanced nation, why does Korea continue to rely on Western nations to foster and raise its children? What role does Korea’s social welfare system play? As inevitable in any country, there are also parents who have no desire to raise their children and turned to relinquishment as an alternative to fostering. In this case, I reflected on how to we can ensure adoption will be practiced legally, ethically, and transparently. These are a handful of the questions with which I grappled.

## Researcher Positionality

Every researcher should be cognizant of his or her positionality and the potential effects on the research process, the participants, and the researcher. In addition, reflexivity in ethnographic research should involve a critical examination of the power relations and politics in the research process. As a Korean adoptee whose research participants include other Korean adoptees, I have approached my research with much reflective deliberation. How do I hold myself accountable for the data in which I collect and interpret, and how do I represent those whom I research? In this section, I will present the debate of “native” researcher and extend this discussion to my own research and position in Korean Adoption Studies.

In her famous 1993 essay,<sup>26</sup> Kirin Narayan challenges the way we perceive researchers as existing “outside” or “inside” a society. Rooted in an essentialist mode of thinking, Narayan cautions that the interchangeable use of terms, such as “native,” “indigenous,” and “insider,” implies there exists an authentic insider’s perspective, which can unproblematically represent the associated group.<sup>27</sup> Beyond cultural identity, we must consider our multiple crosscutting identifications and other factors to determine how we are situated in relation to the people we study. Similarly, Delmos Jones identifies the risk of “native” researchers who distort the truth by relying on personal assumptions about their own communities. These insiders may be able to collect information to which outsiders have no access, yet it is our duty to decolonize anthropological knowledge that has been held captive by even insider researchers. In another critique of the “native” researcher, Kath Weston renders the home versus abroad, cultural

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<sup>26</sup> Kirin Narayan, “How Native Is a “Native” Anthropologist?” *American Anthropologist, New Series* 95, no. 3 (September 1993): 671-686.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 678.

sameness versus cultural difference binaries problematic.<sup>28</sup> Weston is constantly alternating between the “I, Native” and “I, Ethnographer,” moving between two fixed positions while acknowledging the hybrid and positioned nature of her identities. While a researcher may share the same racial, ethnic, and cultural identity with the research group, Takeyuki Tsuda warns that our positionality is also determined by factors such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, etc. Tsuda suggests researchers use their multiple identifications to their own advantage, a method that allows access to different ethnic groups in order to secure desired information and observations.<sup>29</sup>

Shifting the focus to my positionality in my research, does my identity as an overseas Korean adoptee situate me as a “native” ethnographer, one who can overcome the Self-Other binary? Some recent scholars of Korean Adoption Studies have underscored the importance of recovering the voice of the adoptee through the production of scholarly works by adoptees themselves. Tobias Hübinette acknowledges that his “readings, interpretations, and findings are naturally influenced by [his] specific situatedness of being an adopted Korean [himself], as well as a long-time political activist in the adopted Korean movement.”<sup>30</sup> He looks favorably toward a new research trend dominated by adopted Korean themselves in academia, characterized as what he perceives to be a corrective action:

A new research trend worth mentioning and symptomatically dominated by adopted Korean themselves in academia, like myself, deals with the question of the emergence of a specific adopted Korean subculture, movement, and community...[for the first time], they are considered active agents capable of creating their own social spaces and expressing their own authentic voices instead of just being valuable commodities of

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<sup>28</sup> Kath Weston, “The Virtual Anthropologist.” In *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, edited by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, Berkeley: University of California Press (1997): 171

<sup>29</sup> Takeyuki Tsuda, “Ethnicity and the Anthropologist: Negotiating Identities in the Field.” *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (July, 1998): 116.

<sup>30</sup> Tobias Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture* (Seoul, Jimoondang: 2006) 4.

Korea's adoption program, grateful and privileged children of white elite families or idealized and perfected assimilated adoptees in academic research.<sup>31</sup>

While his argument is valid, I find his characterization of Korean adoptees and Korean adoptee scholars problematic. What Hübinette does is reinforce and perpetuate the binaries of self and Other, insider and outsider, adopted and adopter, colonized and colonizer. Although Hübinette is not an anthropologist, it is possible to apply Narayan's proposal that we might more profitably view ourselves in terms of our shifting identification within a field power relations rather than emphasize the outsider versus insider perspectives.

Korean American adoptee scholar Kim Park Nelson also addresses the role of "insider" versus "outsider" in her research with Korean American adoptees. While her role as "insider" provides her greater access to adoptee spaces than a non-adoptee researcher, her role as a sociocultural researcher is inherently positioned as an "outsider."<sup>32</sup> One disadvantage Nelson identifies is when the validity of her work is questioned due to a lack of objectivity as a Korean American adoptee who studies the Korean American adoptee community. Nevertheless, she encourages cultural communities to be researched by insiders; they almost always know more about their community than an outsider, possess knowledge that is informed by their own experiences, and can easily access inside information that is necessary to develop a body of knowledge about their communities. What Nelson emphasizes the most, as either an insider or outsider, is practicing total methodological transparency. While this transparency in methodology does not necessarily reduce subjectivity among researchers, it provides context within which readers may place the research and researcher.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Kim Park Nelson, "Korean Looks, American Eyes: Korean American Adoptees, Race, Culture and Nation," PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota (2009).

As a Korean adoptee who researches overseas Korean adoption and the experiences of adult adoptees, the tension between insider and outsider is an issue I must address in my research. Nelson's analysis of her role as "insider" is important, and I reiterate her call to practice greater transparency in methodology. Additionally, I wish to extend Narayan's position to my role and research by emphasizing the practice of reflexivity. This can produce a more nuanced understanding of issues where boundaries between content and process can get blurred. Wendy Luttrell addresses the issue of reflexivity while encouraging researchers to name the "tensions, contradictions, [and] power imbalances" that are an inevitable part of ethnographic research. She argues that these contradictions and imbalances in power between the interviewee and interviewer cannot ever be eliminated. Researchers should self-reflect on their own positions vis-à-vis the interviews while also making connections with the interviewee and expanding the lens to the psychic, social, cultural and political fields of analysis.<sup>34</sup>

Reflecting more on my position as an "insider," particularly during the time I conducted interviews with other Korean adoptees, I considered the multiple advantages and disadvantages of assuming an "insider" role as an ethnographic researcher. I was vigilantly aware of my own feelings, perceptions, and anxieties during the interviews, for it is easy to distort information by relying on my own assumptions and sentiments about Korean adoptee communities. Another source of anxiety was my struggle to negotiate between the roles of objective researcher and advocate/activist. In the end, however, I realized that my interest for my research was fueled by my desire to present more nuanced research as a Korean adoptee and researcher. What I hope to achieve in this project is to deconstruct dominant and limited narratives of overseas Korean

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>34</sup> Wendy Luttrell, "Good Enough Methods for Ethnographic Research." *Harvard Educational Review*, 70/4. (2000): 499-523.

adoption within the humanitarian discourse.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, it is my hope that by sharing some of the complex and rich stories of adult Korean adoptees, single mothers, original family members, allies, and activists, I can reorient adoption as a social justice issue and situate it within a more holistic understanding of human rights for women and children.

### **Conducted Research and Methods**

I conducted field research for my dissertation in Seoul, Korea from July 2013 to November 2014. During my time in Seoul, I worked closely with three adult adoptee-run organizations, Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (G.O.A'L), Adoptee Solidarity Korea (ASK), and Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoptee Community of Korea (TRACK), and, by extension, became involved with KoRoot, Korean Unwed Mothers and Families Association (KUMFA), and Mindeulla. I served as a volunteer, observer, and active participant at adoptee-run organizations' membership meetings, community-building events, panel discussions, birth family search campaigns, political activism campaigns, meetings related to Special Adoption Law revisions, conferences, adoptee leadership training retreats, and a number of other events that were held throughout the year. I was one of the Human Library panel participants at 2014 Single Mom's Day, speaking alongside a number of Korean women who have been personally affected by adoption or their status as a single mother.

Additionally, I was able to access a great number of surveys, statistics, and data on the Korean adoptee population that resides in Seoul from the three adoptee-run organizations. I also conducted and transcribed fifty, one-hour interviews with Korean adult adoptees who reside in or

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<sup>35</sup> In this context, humanitarian discourse is the study of arguments and claims, in the name of philanthropy and human welfare and often employing the language of paternalism, which has been used to justify intervention and non-intervention in national and international contexts.



were visiting Korea and Korean citizens who are involved in the adoptee community, such as the current president of Korean Adoption Services (KAS) and G.O.A'L volunteers. Lastly, I was able to gather and translate, from Korean to English, a number of Korean newspaper articles and publications released by Korea's Ministry of Health and Welfare that directly address the adoptee community in Korea, adoptee rights, and overseas adoption practices.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The coalition that adoptees have formed with Koreans, unwed mothers, their original families, and allies, as highlighted in the introduction, is one illustrative example of how adult adoptee returnees practice resistance in Korea. Through the lens of Korean adoptee experiences and engagements in Korea, my dissertation examines resistance as a practice that interacts with power in diverse, multiple ways. First and foremost, I want to emphasize that the resistance practices of adult adoptee returnees in Korea fall on a broad spectrum, and adoptees themselves may not necessarily think of their actions as embodying resistance. Resistance is revealed in both overt and subtle ways. At times, it undermines power in a politically articulated and organized way; at other times, it is not a direct reaction to power and holds no particular intention or consciousness. One evident example of organized and overt resistance is the memorial and public protest against Holt Adoption Agency for its failure to comply with Korea's Special Adoption Law. On the other end of the spectrum, a more subtle example is when a Korean American adoptee emphasizes his Korean identity and downplays his American identity, or vice versa, in order to turn a simple negotiation in his favor. Secondly, in order to understand resistance, we must understand power. In many situations, resistance is a reaction to power, yet power can also react to resistance. In this way, we should understand the interactions of power

and resistance as inherently dynamic, open-ended, unpredictable, and constantly shifting rather than assume direct causation. Thirdly, we must be cautious not to privilege intention by concluding behind every act of resistance is an intention or consciousness. While some forms of resistance, such as organized protests and demands for law reforms, are motivated by intention, others should be approached as *practices* rather than intentions. Lastly, a cognizance of multiple systems of hierarchies will illuminate the seeming contradictions, complexities, and ambiguities of power. Resistance may resist one power while embracing and reproducing another, and actors may simultaneously be positioned as powerful and powerless within different systems.

I draw on the contributions of Michel Foucault, which have greatly shaped our understandings of power in its ubiquity and multi-dimensionality,<sup>36</sup> and Michel de Certeau's concepts of strategies, tactics, and resistance against power in daily life practices.<sup>37</sup> For Foucault, power is everywhere; it manifests itself in multiple forms, it is omnipresent. His "analytics of power" allows us to examine how technologies of power and knowledge have developed in historical frameworks. This reveals the processes through which we have come to be, how knowledge is produced, and how identities are constituted. This genealogy of modern power sheds light on the impact of state agencies and the implementation of legislation on various groups.

Foucault's method is particularly useful for my research, for it facilitates an exploration into the shifting fields of power linked to the Korean state and society. An inquiry into how these subjectivities have been produced and managed through historically particular, geopolitical,

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<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*, Translated by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1990); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1977); "Body/Power" and "Truth and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge* edited by C. Gordon (U.K.: Harvester, 1980).

<sup>37</sup> de Certeau, Michel, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

social, and economic discourses is key to understanding the complex nature of the adoption industry. Additionally, through an application of Foucault's notion of "governmentality," we can see how the Korean state managed and exercised control over the body of its populace not simply at the level of state politics, but through techniques designed to govern the conduct of individuals at every level.<sup>38</sup> The era of Park Chung Hee, for example, was concerned with governing conduct through the regulation of the population in order to produce "docile" bodies. In the name of national security and economic development, the state relied on "biopower" by instating laws and policies to manage women's reproduction, births, and deaths, also removing from the nation those classified as "undesirable" through overseas adoption practices. In contemporary times, adoption agencies and welfare facilities have functioned as agents of biopower, directly impacting on the lives of unwed mothers in particular. Original mothers who were marginalized, confined to unwed mother homes, and coerced into relinquishing their children to adoption is just one example of how power produces subjectivities.

In addition to elucidating some of the manifestations of power in Korea, such as the regulation of women's bodies, efforts to "re-Koreanize" adoptee returnees, and knowledge production of the heteronormative family, it is possible to conceptualize how these actors maneuver, negotiate, and practice resistance against forms of power. While Foucault famously articulates, "Where there is power, there is resistance,"<sup>39</sup> his preoccupation with exploring power and the structural position of actors necessitates a complementary approach in order to explore the modalities of resistance more extensively. I aim to illustrate how these actors practice resistance through everyday practices or modes of consumption in Korea, and, moreover, how

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<sup>38</sup> Foucault, 1977.

<sup>39</sup> Foucault, 1990, 95.

these practices are capable of reconfiguring a given unjust order. I argue that resistance can force power to react, and subjectivity can be reclaimed.

de Certeau's theoretical contributions are particularly useful when shifting our focus to the agency of adoptee returnees, unwed mothers, and other actors. A focus on actors' agency highlights the creative and sometimes ordinary workings of these individuals while also acknowledging the inherent power of everyday practices. For de Certeau, there are "strategies" and "tactics." Associated with domination, hegemonic at all times, and only available to subjects of "will and power," strategies actualize a schematic hierarchization of social reality. Strategies are a means by which power creates a space for itself. Tactics, however, are not a subset of strategies but can erode main strategies of power. Emerging in the forms of trickery, adaptation to an environment, and other hidden practices with no explicit borders, tactics can erode power mechanisms. Actors are not passive objects of subjects, but rather active agents who exercise tactical modes of practice. For de Certeau, everyday resistance is about using imposed systems and how tactics in ordinary activities can turn "the actual order of things to their own ends"; "order is *tricked* by an art."<sup>40</sup> Once more, take the example of the Korean adoptee who shifts between different cultural and linguistic spaces to adapt to a particular situation or environment on any given day. Through this everyday practice or mode of consumption, such as reading, writing, and speaking, this adoptee has found a creative way of acting in which he uses an imposed system to his own end. This, de Certeau argues, reflects a tactic of everyday resistance that undermines power.

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<sup>40</sup> De Certeau, 1984, 26.

## Overview of Chapters

This dissertation is an ethnography that conceptualizes power and resistance practices through the narratives of adoptee returnees, unwed mothers, and others who have been affected by overseas adoption in Korea. Comprised of three main chapters and a conclusion, this dissertation investigates the multiple and diverse ways actors practice resistance while also reading resistance as a diagnostic of power. This reveals the complex and sometimes contradictory ways that power manifests in political forms, the adoption industry, social interactions, and beyond. One of my main research questions posits how adult adoptees resist *and* support existing systems of power in Korea at the same time. How have adoptees resisted power in a variety of creative ways, some of which we cannot attribute to politics or a collective adoptee consciousness? How have adoptees resisted the very system and institutions that have produced their subjectivities as overseas Korean adoptees? What does this reveal about the historically changing relations of power between actors and the state? Lastly, in what ways are adult adoptee returnees in Korea shifting the adoption discourse by building coalitions with unwed mother organizations and original families who have lost their children to adoption?

Chapter Two, broken down into two sections, presents a historical overview of adoption practices in Korea, including the return and resettlement of adoptees in their country of birth. Section I explores the history of adoption practices in Korea, spanning from adoption practices in the mid- and late Chosŏn dynasty to adoption practices in the current decade. As revealed in different historical periods, power manifests itself in multiple forms throughout the history of overseas Korean adoption. During the inception of overseas adoption practices, members of Korean society were subjected to “biopower,” as the government was able to determine who was a desirable member, and who was to be removed from Korean society as a cost-saving alternative

to supporting an effective social welfare system. During the period of “militarized modernization”<sup>41</sup> under the authoritarian regimes of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan, the state aimed to regulate the population and increase productivity through family planning campaigns and policies, mobilized women to be domestic and productive members of society through coercive measures, and through other effective means. Currently, power lies in institutions that discipline individuals and produce citizens with “docile bodies,” such as contemporary laws that seek to control women’s sexuality and reproductive rights, and laws that discriminate against unwed mothers.

Section II situates the return of Korean adoptees to their country of birth within the history of overseas Korean adoption. I discuss how a government campaign facilitated the return of adult adoptees to Korea, and how these adoptees resist and reproduce systems of power. On a collective level, I argue that this act of return, to a place from where adoptees were adopted away in previous decades, signifies an act of resistance against existing systems of power. I suspect that some, including many of the adoptee returnees with whom I spoke, would reject the claim that each individual decision to return to Korea signifies an act of resistance. What I wish to reemphasize in response is that intention and resistance should, at times, be treated exclusively. For every adoptee who returns to Korea with the conscious desire to dismantle the overseas Korean adoption industry, there is another who returns to sightsee and experience the cuisine. Neither intention nor consciousness necessarily signals resistance. It is the overall act of return to a place and system—a place that facilitated the removal and overseas placement of over 200,000 Korean children in order to alleviate economic and social problems in Korea, and a system that

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<sup>41</sup> Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

did not expect nor was equipped to accommodate the large influx of adult adoptee returnees decades later—that entails resistance.

I also explore everyday modes of consumption and ordinary forms of resistance that adoptees practice in their country of birth. Through offering a number of incentives to adult adoptees, such as desirable visa status and free Korean language courses, the Korean government has demonstrated its ambition to build a global Korean network that includes overseas adoptees. While some adoptee returnees have accepted this invitation, reflected in their return to and resettlement in Korea, many have used these imposed systems to their own ends, practicing tactics in ordinary activities, such as code-switching, to turn the actual order of things to their own ends. Another example of an everyday practice of resistance is adoptee returnees' negotiation with the Korean language. The Korean language assumes a central role in the lives adoptee returnees, whether it is an active commitment to learning it, a passive interaction with it, or an outright refusal to learn or speak it. Adoptees who have taken up Korean language study support and resist systems of power: they support it by applying their acquired language skills to work in Korean companies and attend graduate school programs, both of which have been encouraged by the Korean government in its aim to rewrite adult adoptees into the Korean national narrative and drive toward greater globalization; they resist it by using their Korean language skills in everyday situations, cross-cultural or linguistic code-switching from Korean to the language of their adoptive country, or feigning knowledge of the Korean language whenever it is advantageous to them.

Chapter Three explores specific mechanisms of power in the adoption industry and how adoptees have resisted it. By focusing on adoptees' original family searches, paying close attention to those pursued through G.O.A'L's First Trip Home program, I elucidate some of the

creative ways that adoptees have undermined power through their contestation of the present order. To understand how power and resistance interact at the contested site of search and reunion, I approach the institution of overseas Korean adoption as a system of power that has prospered off the separation of families. Through the lens of adoptees' experiences, I identify some of the obstacles that hinder reunion, which elucidate the workings of power in the adoption industry. The control of information and records is one such example. The adoption agencies believe that the adoption files are their property, and they are protecting the confidentiality and best interests of the parents of origin by not disclosing identifying information to the adoptee. This reveals the logic through which the agencies operate: they assume families of origin do not want to reunite nor pursue a relationship with their now-adult child, demonstrated through the relinquishment of their child decades ago. For this reason, the agencies are often hesitant to pursue a search on behalf of the adoptee, especially when the mother of origin was unwed at the time of relinquishment. There is a risk the mother's current life will be disrupted, and she will place blame on the adoption agency for not protecting her privacy. Adoptees in their activism and advocacy work have aimed to disrupt this assessment. The reunion and post reunion experiences of adoptees and mothers of origin who were separated from their children decades ago also reveal a different story.

Additionally, I argue that original family search services, such as G.O.A.'L's, demonstrate a creative form of resistance against the systems of power and institutions that separated adoptees from their original families, then transforming these separations into financial gains. Adoptees face multiple challenges during the original family search, such as difficulties accessing complete adoption records and the hesitance of adoption agency social workers to facilitate a reunion. There are a number of cases in which adoption agencies falsified or altered



adoption papers in order to frame a child as more desirable to potential adoptive parents. It is only after adult adoptees are reunited with original family members that they learn the “truth” of their separation circumstances prior to their adoptions. Granting adoptees access to their full adoption files and reuniting adoptees with their original families only exposes some of the unethical and illegal practices among adoption agencies in the past.

In the Chapter Four, I explore politicized, organized sites of resistance among adoptee returnees in Korea. Specifically, I focus on a coalition that has formed among adult adoptee returnees, unwed and single mothers, original Korean family members who have been separated from a child or children through Korean adoption practice, a Korean pastor and his wife who run an adoptee guesthouse in Seoul, and other allies. In this chapter, power manifests itself in the policies, programs, and campaigns that prioritize adoption practices over family preservation, thereby contributing to the continued separation of Korean families due to reasons of poverty, divorce, among others. The activism and advocacy work of those who recognize adoption practices as an applied quick “fix” to Korea’s socioeconomic economic problems in the 21st century embodies organized and politicized resistance practices.

This chapter begins with an inquiry into how the figure of unwed mother shifted over time from the implementation of a patrilineal lineage system during the colonial period, based on Neo-Confucian ideas, to the Korean War and postwar periods. One of the main foci of this chapter is on Korea’s 2011 Special Adoption Law revisions and the significance, the majority of which were drafted and submitted by this coalition. The intention of these revisions was to bring greater legal rights to unwed and single mother families and adult adoptees in Korea, yet the passing and implementation of these revisions has elicited a number of mixed responses and multiple attempts to repeal these revisions. Additionally, these law revisions have been directly

linked to a number of incidents including media attention surrounding the baby box<sup>42</sup> and Hyunsu's death, the incident described at the beginning of this chapter. Through a reading of *The Drop Box*, a documentary film that highlights the story of Korean Pastor Lee Jong-rak who built a "baby box," I present the diverse debates around the baby box. More specifically, I outline the position and activities of Mission to Promote Adoption in Korea (MPAK), a U.S.-based organization founded by a Korean American adoptee that is pro-baby box and aims to promote adoption among Korean and Korean American families, and the anti-baby box and pro-family preservation position that adoptee activists and their allies have assumed. This chapter closes with the story of Pastor Hae-sung Kim of Global Sarang, a pastor whose organization assists migrants in Korea and who planned to open a second baby box to accommodate single mothers of non-Korean backgrounds. His eventual decision to abandon these plans, due mainly to an eye-opening meeting he had with adult adoptees and Pastor Kim of KoRoot, reflects the potential of mobilization and resistance to significantly challenge or alter existing structures of oppression. Overall, this chapter seeks to demonstrate the aim of adoptee activists and this coalition to reframe adoption as a human rights and social justice issue, emphasize the rights of single mother families and family preservation over adoption, and support ethical, legal, and transparent adoptions.

Serving as the conclusion of this dissertation, Chapter Five summarizes the multiple and various forms of resistance practices and systems of power within the context of adult Korea adoptee experiences in Korea. This chapter opens with an article published in *The New York Times Magazine* in 2015 that highlighted a number of adult Korean adoptees who returned to

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<sup>42</sup> In December 2009, Pastor Jong-rak Lee set up a "baby box" that made it possible for parents to anonymously abandon their child. The baby box and Pastor Lee's efforts have garnered a great amount of media attention both within and outside of Korea. While some have celebrated Pastor Lee and the baby box as mercifully saving babies who would have otherwise died by infanticide or been abandoned on the street, adoptee rights and unwed mother advocates accuse him and the media attention surrounding the baby box of facilitating illegal, child abandonment.

Korea, their diverse experiences, and their activities. Garnering nearly 1000 comments, this article reveals how the topic of adoption has long been polarized by different views and approaches. In particular, a significant amount of criticism and even anger was directed toward the adoptee activists mentioned in this article who spoke critically of overseas adoption practices and pushed for reform. Taking this article as a starting point, this chapter considers how approaching issues related to Korean adoption practices through a social justice and human rights framework complicates the notions of international humanitarianism, the heteronormative family unit in Korea, and the “best interests of the child.” In this regard, I discuss how adopting this framework allows for a different look at some of the conventional narratives on Korean adoption and adoptees. Lastly, I offer a reflection as an individual whose life has been profoundly impacted by adoption. This includes a personal essay on adoptee rights, access to adoption records, and original family search, which was previously published in Korea during my fieldwork year.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **The History of Adoption in Korea**

#### **Introduction**

A 2008 article in the New York Times featured two separate Korean couples that had adopted infants through South Korea's domestic adoption program.<sup>43</sup> Greatly daunted by the stigma of adoption, the first couple chose not to disclose the truth of how their daughter was incorporated into their family. Instead, they told the husband's parents that this child was the product of a marital affair. Also desiring to conceal the adoption of a child, the wife of the second couple wore maternity clothes over a special pillow for months in order to fake a pregnancy. According to the husband, this was done to protect their adopted child from future difficulties in acquiring a career or with marriage, as bloodlines are deeply valued in a Confucian society such as that of Korea. The stories of these two couples may seem odd to those from countries where adoption is commonplace, socially accepted, or even celebrated. Yet, in a country whose society places immense value on bloodlines and where prejudice against adopted children lingers, these two cases are far from uncommon.

Many in Korea with whom I discussed the stigma of adoption directed the conversation to a longstanding Confucian "tradition" of patriarchy, characterized by male-dominant systems and the deprivation of women's social and legal rights. "Because of Confucianism," was one of the most commonly articulated responses to my question of why there exists a stigma of adoption in contemporary Korean society. Those who recognized the connection among unwed motherhood, child relinquishment, and adoption often referenced the patriarchal institutions of

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<sup>43</sup> Norimitsu Onishi, "Korea Aims to End Stigma of Adoption and Stop 'Exporting' Babies," *The New York Times* (NY), October 8, 2008.

family-head (*hoju*) and family registry (*hojŏk*). Others suggested a premodern Korean history devoid of adoption practices. While patriarchal institutions have certainly restricted women's legal rights within family relationships in modern Korea, I reject a linear understanding of Confucian patriarchy as it is linked to contemporary adoption practices. I argue that we should direct our attention to the legislation of Korean family law in 1957, which traces its origins to the Japanese legal system imposed on colonial Korea. Additionally, in both Koryŏ (918-1392) and Chosŏn (1392-1910) societies, particularly in the latter part of the Chosŏn dynasty when Confucianism reached its peak of influence, adoption practices remained prevalent. The "modern" concept of fostering an orphaned, abandoned, or relinquished child is a departure from adoption practices during the Chosŏn dynasty, which were tied directly to ancestral rites, inheritance rights, lineage preservation, and marriage practices. Notwithstanding these differences, it is inaccurate to assume that the practice of adoption was limited or absent throughout the history of premodern Korea.

In the first section of this chapter, I begin by discussing how adoption practices among Korean elites shifted during the mid- and late Chosŏn dynasty. Next, I point to the establishment of residential care facilities by religious organizations in the late 19th century, and the establishment of a social welfare division by the Korean government under Japanese colonial rule. No historical overview of overseas Korean adoption is complete without a discussion of the Korean War and its effects, which is presented in the following section. I situate the origins of overseas Korean adoption within the context of the Korean War, U.S. humanitarian involvement, and, by extension, the Cold War. My analysis will then focus on Korea's rapid economic development under Park Chung Hee and concurrent shifts in overseas adoption practices, tied closely to the Family Planning Program, Family Law, and Overseas Emigration Law. This

requires that we look briefly at the inception of Korea's modern legal system during the period of Japanese colonial rule and its central role in the legislation Korean family law in 1957. The 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul marked a turning point for overseas Korean adoption practices, prompting the Korean government and media to address overseas adoption on a public level for the first time. Lastly, I look at the institutions of overseas adoption and domestic adoption, as both continue to be practiced in Korea, and the recent enactment of law revisions that directly affect these practices.

Throughout the various historical shifts of the institution of Korean adoption, power is revealed in multiple forms. During the inception of overseas adoption practices, for example, orphans and mixed-race children were subjected to "biopower," as the government determined them as undesirable members of society. As a cost-saving alternative to supporting an effective social welfare system, an overseas adoption system was developed, and they were sent overseas. Within the geopolitical and humanitarian discourses involving U.S. and Korea relationship, power also manifested itself in the paternalist rescue efforts of poor, Asian children. During the period of "militarized modernization" beginning in the 1960s, the state aimed to regulate the population and increase economic productivity through a number of coercive measures and monetary incentives. In contemporary times, power lies in institutions that discipline individuals and produce citizens with "docile bodies," particularly women in regards to their reproductive rights and rights as unwed mothers.

In Section II of this chapter, I situate the return of Korean adoptees to their country of birth within the history of Korean adoption. I discuss the means through which adult adoptees have been able to return to Korea, in the form of temporary visits or long-term residence, and how adoptees have concurrently resisted and reproduced systems of power. Through offering the

F-4 visa and dual citizenship, motherland tours to Korea, ample opportunities to teach English, and scholarships to study the Korean language, the Korean government has officially welcomed adult adoptees back to their country of birth. This can be better understood when situated within the context of the government's *segyehwa* campaign, which will be discussed in Section II. While these adoptee returnees have responded to this invitation by returning to Korea through these tours, accepting English teaching positions at after school institutes, and by studying the Korean language, many have used these imposed systems and practiced tactics in ordinary activities, such as code switching, to accommodate their own needs or as an adaptation method.

Additionally, the collective return to a country from where adoptees were once removed to reduce or eliminate socio-economic problems, I argue, indicates an act of resistance. Once infants and young children who were sent away from their country of birth, they now return, in the thousands, as adults to reclaim a physical and symbolic space from where they were once removed. While many of these returnees may not perceive their own acts of return as demonstrating resistance due to their main motivations for return, such as studying the Korean language or connecting with their roots, what I wish to reemphasize is that intention and resistance should, at times, be treated exclusively. For every adoptee who returns to Korea with the conscious desire to dismantle the overseas Korean adoption industry, there is another who returns to sightsee and experience the cuisine. Neither intention nor consciousness necessarily signals resistance. It is the overall act of return to a place and system—a place that facilitated the removal and overseas placement of over 200,000 Korean children in order to alleviate economic and social problems in Korea, and a system that did not expect nor was equipped to accommodate the large influx of adult adoptee returnees decades later—that demonstrates resistance.

## SECTION I: A Historical Overview of Korean Adoption Practices

### The “Confucianization” of Chosŏn Society and Changes in Inheritance and Adoption Practices in the mid- to late Chosŏn

During the Koryŏ and early Chosŏn, families shared the task of holding ancestral rituals (*yunhaeng*), individuals could select among cognatic, agnatic or trilateral membership, property was divided fairly equally among female and male siblings of the same status, and many selected a daughter as heir as an alternative to adopting a son. However, there was a shift toward primogeniture by the late Chosŏn, greatly affecting each of these areas. Inheritance and ritual obligations were assigned to the eldest son, a move from cognatic to agnatic membership occurred, women were eliminated from heirship, and the adoption of an agnatic “nephew” became a common practice among upper class and some lower class families.<sup>44</sup> What caused these shifts to occur? To what extent did law changes permeate throughout Chosŏn society? In order to answer these questions and more comprehensively understand these changes as they were related to adoption practices, we must first investigate law changes and the subsequent, yet gradual, shifts in inheritance and ancestral rites.

There were undoubtedly a number of significant social changes that occurred during the “Confucianization” process of the Chosŏn.<sup>45</sup> Yet prior to the emergence of a patrilineal lineage

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<sup>44</sup> For a comprehensive study on adoption and inheritance practices in the Chosŏn dynasty, see Mark Peterson, *Korean Adoption and Inheritance: Case Studies in the Creation of a Classic Confucian Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University East Asia Program, 1996).

<sup>45</sup> According to Deuchler, “Confucianization” refers to the transformation of the Chosŏn into a classic Confucian society. Neo-Confucian ideology, she argues, was the principle force and formative agent behind this process, first taking root at the beginning of the Chosŏn and gradually becoming internalized over the course of a few centuries. While Mark Peterson (1996) generally agrees with this assessment, he also suggests a number of other key factors that may have interacted with and influenced the process of this societal transformation: changes in marriage practices, demographic factors, developments in the economy, agricultural practices, depletion of natural resources, the legal consequences of violating ritual and inheritance law, and the impact of the Imjin and Manchu Invasions.



culture, women shared economic and jural equality with their male siblings, also possessing the right to divorce and remarry. In order to maintain ties with her natal group, a wife's property was passed onto her husband's family through her children who received relatively equal shares. Moreover, a widower who inherited his deceased wife's assets, and then remarried, was legally obliged to return these assets to his deceased wife's natal family. Marriages through matrilineal cross-cousins were also recognized, and a man could choose between his paternal or maternal sides for personal gain. These conditions allowed for descent groups to extend their lineages through a horizontal system of marriage and familial ties.

From the end of the Koryŏ dynasty, Neo-Confucianism supporters began demanding a move toward Confucian-style ancestor worship and other social criteria. Yet, it wasn't until the transition into the new dynasty that laws were written around a patrilineal lineage system that reflected and reinforced Neo-Confucian ideology. Not only did these laws represent the adoption of new ritual proscriptions, but they also functioned as a catalyst for gradual, fundamental social change that affected the areas of ancestor worship, mourning and funeral rights, marriage, among others. While the nature of this transformation is debated,<sup>46</sup> what is important to highlight is that these new laws did not penetrate all levels of Chosŏn society; the majority of non-elite widows disregarded these new patriarchal structures of society, continuing to remarry well into the late Chosŏn. In order to skirt these laws, many opted to withhold their remarriage status from the family registries or found other creative ways to make their remarriages difficult to trace.<sup>47</sup>

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For more on the Confucianization of Korea, see Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992).

<sup>46</sup> Scholars have engaged in debated on how the Confucianization of Chosŏn society unfolded. One camp argues that the adoption of a patrilineal ideology was a linear process, while another claims it was a non-linear attempt by the state to reorganize all areas of society, aligned with patrilineal principles. For more, see Ji-Young Jung, "Questions Concerning Widows' Social Status and Remarriage in Late Chosŏn," *In Women and Confucianism in Chosŏn Korea: New Perspectives*, edited by Youngmin Kim and Michael J. Pettid (New York: Suny Press, 2011).

Early Chosŏn legislatures relied on Chinese legal models to distinguish between two types of adoption: *suyangja* (adopted son) and *siyangja* (foster son). Adopted before the age of three, *suyangja* origins were located in his adoptive father or mother's side, or he had been abandoned with unknown origins. Additionally, this son was qualified by law to receive his adoptive parents property as inheritance. *Siyangja*, on the other hand, was adopted at a mature age and shared his parent's property with the one responsible for ancestral services. Great debates around the relationship between *suyangja* and *kyehuja* (established heir) emerged, eventually prompting state councilors to formally assess this issue in 1442. It was determined that due to the non-agnatic relationship of the *suyangja*, he was not qualified to perform ancestral service for his adoptive parents. This ruling had adverse effects on the *suyangja*'s economic expectations, eliminating the possibility of assuming full heir responsibilities. However, due to the abundance of adoptions motivated by the desire for economic gains, many sought to "invest" their wealth in a son from a distantly related influential family, from whom he could receive favors throughout the course of his life, rather than pursue an agnatic adoption with a close relative. Economically motivated adoptions became a common source of contention with collateral kin.

Through the lens of the *ch'ongbu* (eldest daughter-in-law), we can identify another instance where commoners continued their practice of adoption even with legal changes to the institutional system of *yeje* (rites and customs) under King Myŏngjong in the mid-16th century.<sup>48</sup> The issue in which the *ch'ongbu* dealt was how to designate a legal heir in the event of her sonless husband's death. If obligations to perform ancestral rites were assigned to the second son

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 2011.

<sup>48</sup> For more on this topic, see Lee SoonGu. "The Rights of the Eldest Daughter-in-Law and Strengthening of Adoption of Lineage Heirs in the Mid-Chosŏn Period," *In Women and Confucianism in Chosŏn Korea: New Perspectives*, edited by Youngmin Kim and Michael J. Pettid, (New York: Suny Press, 2011) 89-107.

of the family, the *ch'ongbu*, by law, was required to hand over all properties associated to the rites, oftentimes including the current residence. With pressure to adopt a son in order to protect her economic rights, many *ch'ongbu* navigated around this system by adopting males of distant blood relations following her husband's death. This was a measure taken to prevent threats from direct family members over inheritance if she had adopted a son from her husband's brother. The custom of adopting a son after a husband's death began with the "aim of self-preservation," yet was so commonly practiced that it became a major influence in "changing social norms regarding succession of rites."<sup>49</sup>

As demonstrated in this section, the emergence of a patrilineal lineage culture and "Confucianization" of Chosŏn society through the implementation of laws led to a number of significant social changes. A shift toward primogeniture led to the exclusion of women and others from inheritance and ancestral rites. Whereas women in the Koryŏ and early Chosŏn were able to legally exercise divorce and marriage rights, shared a relatively equal portion of inheritance rights with her brothers, and were often selected as heir, women in the mid- and late Chosŏn lost these legal rights. Nevertheless, what this section reveals is how women of non-*yangban* status engaged in creative ways to circumvent these laws, continuing to engage in a number of these practices. Additionally, adoption remained prevalent even when Confucianism reached its peak of influence during the mid- to late Chosŏn dynasty. Families practiced multiple forms of adoption connected to legal changes in ancestral rites, inheritance, lineage preservation, and marriage practices. To the extent that we can recognize the Confucianization of Chosŏn proved neither linear nor absolute in its progression, we must deconstruct the idea that the contemporary stigma of adoption can be solely explained by Korea's longstanding Confucian tradition, characterized by patriarchal values and a lack of women's social and legal rights.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 102.

Rather, we should focus on the lasting impact of Korea's modern legal system during the colonial period (1910-1945) and family law movement in the postcolonial period on contemporary Korean society.

### **The Establishment of Residential Care Facilities**

Although, historically, Korea experienced its first contact with Catholicism and Christianity in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, it was not until the 19th century that religious missionaries made significant inroads into Korean society. The tumultuous social and political realities of the late 19th century resulted in the opening of Korea's doors, leading to an upsurge of missionary activities in Korea. Horace G. Underwood, an American Presbyterian missionary, established the first modern orphanage in 1887, which took the form of an orphanage-school.<sup>50</sup> A number of other residential care facilities for children were established shortly thereafter. During this time, however, these facilities remained under the auspices of religious organizations without support from the Korean government. It was not until 1921, under Japanese rule, that the Korean government established a social welfare division, including a child welfare programs and policies, and the number of residential care facilities continued to grow. By 1950, a year also marked by the onset of the Korean War, 8,908 children were being cared for in 116 child welfare residential care facilities, with the majority of these facilities established by Westerners.<sup>51</sup> In this same year, the Korean government enacted new regulations to provide standards for the residential care of children. However, because the establishment of charitable social welfare facilities and other activities by foreign voluntary agencies were so

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<sup>50</sup> Jacqueline Pak, "Cradle of the Covenant: Ahn Changho and the Christian Roots of the Korean Constitution," in *Christianity in Korea*, edited by Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Timothy S. Lee. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006): 129.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 122.

effective, it has been argued that these activities established the foundation for modern Korean social work and its focus on private and institutional care. As a result, the government did not feel compelled to formulate comprehensive social policy and planning.<sup>52</sup>

### **The Division of Korea and the Korean War (6.25)<sup>53</sup>**

Around midnight on August 10-11, 1945, just days before the official liberation of Korea from Japanese rule, the United States State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee (SWNCC) determined the thirty-eighth parallel as the military demarcation line due to high-level fears of Soviet expansion. Originally intended as a temporary division of the country, this division remained with the onset of the Cold War and establishments of a separate U.S.-oriented regime in South Korea under Syngman Rhee, and a Soviet supported communist regime in North Korea under Kim Il-sung.<sup>54</sup> This division foreshadowed the lasting presence and influence that the U.S. military would have on South Korea during the war, over the course of multiple military regimes, through Korea's transition to democracy, and even into the present day. The period leading up to the Korean War was marked by the return from Japan by thousands of Koreans who had been mobilized for war purposes by the Japanese, an increase in political awareness among the Korean population, the formation of multiple worker unions, peasant unions, and political organizations, and the growing tension between the United States and USSR. On June 25, 1950,

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<sup>52</sup> Tobias Hübinette, "Korean Adoption History," in Eleana Kim (ed.), *Community 2004: Guide to Korea for Overseas Adopted Koreans* (Seoul: Overseas Koreans Foundation, 2004) 2.

<sup>53</sup> The issue of naming the war reflects the position of the historian or individual who remembers. South Koreans refer to this war as "6.25" (*yugyo*), which marks the day that North Korean soldiers supposedly launched an unprovoked attack against the South. North Koreans, on the other hand, refer to the war as the "Fatherland Liberation War" (Choguk haebang chŏnjaeng), which reveals the North Korean's political stance to drive American forces out and achieve unification. For a lengthier discussion on this issue, see Kim Tongch'un, *Chŏnjaeng kwa sahoe: uri ege Han'guk chŏnjaeng ūn muŏt iŏnna?* [The Unending Korean War: A Social History] (Seoul: Tol Pegae, 2000).

<sup>54</sup> Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*, (New York, W.W. Norton & Company: 2005) 186-189.

the Korean War broke out, and the Korean peninsula was transformed into a massive battlefield that inflicted devastation and destruction on lands, villages, cities, and on the lives of its inhabitants.

### **Effects of the War and the Birth of Overseas Korean Adoption Practices**

The practice of overseas Korean adoption can be understood as the movement of children from Korea to adoptive parents in certain Western nations, directly stemming from the Korean War (1950-1953). Thousands of lost, abandoned, and orphaned Korean children wandered the streets during and after the war. In 1951, the United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency estimated the existence of 100,000 orphaned children and, in 1953, 293,000



Image 2.1: Korean War Orphans. Photograph by Anthony Younger and Keith Glennie-Smith (1953)

widowed women were caring for 516,000 children under the age of thirteen.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, millions were displaced from their homes as the country was ravaged by war.

A population of mixed-race children, born to Korean women and U.S. or U.N. military men, also emerged as a direct result of foreign military intervention on the southern half of the Korean peninsula. These children, who in many cases were orphaned or abandoned by both parents, were considered to be a massive post-war social problem and served as living reminders of the devastation and trauma inflicted by the war. Instrumental in the care of these mixed-race children was Pearl S. Buck Foundation (PSBF). Pearl S. Buck, better known for her novel, *The*

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<sup>55</sup> Hübinette, 2004, 2.

*Good Earth* (1931), and as 1938 Nobel Prize winner, recognized the struggles of mixed-race Asian children in racially homogenous societies. She coined the term “Amerasian”<sup>56</sup> to identify children who were the products of unions between Americans and Asians in the wake of World War II. Buck went on to found a social work organization known as the Pearl S. Buck Foundation (PSBF) in 1964, which changed its name to Pearl S. Buck International in 1999. In an interview with Theodore F. Harris, the organization’s founder insisted that her interest and purpose in life was of the following:

My purpose was to work out a means whereby a problem could be solved...the problem of the half American children, thousands of them, all over Asia. [I have] a profound interest in helping people to organize their lives so that they can live and work and maintain themselves and this is what the Foundation is trying to do for the Amerasian children in Asia.<sup>57</sup>

With a branch in Korea, this foundation provided food, medical care, and some financial assistance to Amerasian children while also assigning them social workers and American sponsors, with whom they kept in contact through messages sent back and forth from the United States.

According to the Pearl S. Buck International Korea homepage, 4,500 Amerasians were registered under the organization’s social care starting in 1964, but it was likely that there were many who were left unaccounted. Won Moo Hurh in a study conducted in 1972, estimated that there were approximately 12,280 children born to American military men and Korean women between 1950-65, half of whom were adopted to Western nations.<sup>58</sup> According to data collected

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<sup>56</sup> I choose to use the term “mixed-race Koreans” over “Amerasian” in this paper. Margo Okazawa-Rey suggests the term “Amerasian” refers specifically to children born out of affairs between American military men and Asian women. For more, see Margo Okazawa-Rey, “American Children of GI Town: A Legacy of U.S. Militarism in South Korea,” *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies*, 3.1 (1997): 72-88.

<sup>57</sup> Theodore F. Harris, *Pearl S. Buck: A Biography* (New York, The John Day Company: 1969) 340-341.

from the Ministry of Family Overseas Korea Foundation, Amerasian mixed ancestry was considered a type of physical disability when regulating overseas adoption cases, categorized among those with “harelip, deformity, prematurity, mental illness, and heart disease.”<sup>59</sup> Not only were Amerasians in South Korea placed in a separate category of “other,” but their existence as multiracial subjects was also considered to be an abnormality within the Korean nation.

### *International Humanitarianism, Cold War Politics, and the Birth of Overseas Adoption*

In 1950, Christian Minister Dr. Bob Pierce founded an organization in the United States named World Vision, which served as a missionary service organization focusing on the needs of children overseas, specifically in Asia. Among World Vision’s areas of international humanitarianism activity was its Christian social welfare service, a program that organized the sponsorship of orphans and destitute children in Asia. For a small amount of money every month, “parents” could sponsor “their” child by providing monetary assistance that would go toward the construction of hospitals, clinics, and schools. Similar to other sponsorship programs in Asia, World Vision’s sponsorship program was part of a broader cultural movement in the United States, a paternalistic movement within political implications. As Catherine Ceniza Choy contends, these humanitarianism programs served as a complement to the U.S. government’s agenda during the Cold War, “cultivating a sense of obligation to Asia among Americans who might not initially support U.S. political and military intervention in that region.”<sup>60</sup> In addition to its responsibility to Korea and the rest of the world as a defender of freedom and bulwark against

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<sup>58</sup> Won Moo Hurh, “Marginal Children of War: An Exploratory Study of American-Korean Children” *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 2 (1972) 10-20.

<sup>59</sup> “Adoptees by Types of Disability: Domestically and Abroad” examined by Park Kyung-Tae and quoted in Mary Lee, “Mixed Race Peoples in the Korean National Imaginary and Family” *Korean Studies* 32 (2009) 60.

<sup>60</sup> Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Global Families: A History of Asian International Adoption in America (Nation of Nations)* (New York: New York Press, 2013): 80.



communism, the U.S. also had a vested interest in addressing the problem of mixed-raced Korean children for many of these children were fathered by American troops. American Media reports on the Korean War often remarked about the “special responsibility” that the United States had to these GI babies who suffered from ostracism and persecution in Korea. It was through the interplay of these geopolitical, religious, and humanitarian intentions that World Vision was able to expedite the adoptions of Korean children to families in the United States.

One method through which World Vision secured American sponsors was by screening viewings of *Lost Sheep*, a documentary that highlighted the horrific living conditions for South Korean mixed-race children and orphans. Two individuals who saw and were emotionally affected by this documentary were Harry and Bertha Holt, an evangelical couple from rural



Image 2.2: Harry Holt (center) in Korea, pictured with Mrs. Raetz, the wife of the overseas director of World Vision, an aid worker, and the children he would later adopt. The child on Harry’s left arm did not pass the physical exam. Photo from *The Korea Times* (1955)

Oregon, considered by many as the pioneers of overseas Korean adoption. In 1955, with the assistance of Child Placement Service (now called Social Welfare Society), a Korean organization that aimed to mitigate the orphan crisis, World Vision played an instrumental role in facilitating the Holt’s adoption of eight mixed-race children to the United States by pressuring Congress to pass a special act that would allow visas for the children. After the adoptions of their children were complete, the Holts began assisting other American Christian couples with their adoptions of Korean children. They began building orphanages in Korea shortly thereafter, followed by opening an adoption service in the United States in 1956.

While Holt's Korean adoption enterprise has been often hailed as the ultimate "expression of humanistic altruism," Harry Holt, even from the beginning, was a controversial figure in both the American media and the target of criticism among professional social workers and child welfare specialists in the United States.<sup>61</sup> During the initial investigations that determined whether or not prospective American adoptive parents were suitable, Holt's primary concern was that children would be adopted into families of "born again believers" of the Christian faith.<sup>62</sup> It was in this context—the backdrop of Cold War politics and U.S. military intervention, Holt's Christian rhetoric of "God's will," and humanitarian efforts of the paternalist U.S. to save these Asian children from war and poverty—that the practice of overseas Korean adoption was born. During the period that is considered the first wave of adoptions from Korea to the United States, a recorded 2,899 Korean children were adopted between 1953 and 1959.<sup>63</sup>

### **Korea's Economic Development and the Shift in Overseas Adoption Practices**

The April 19, 1960 Student Uprising represented a direct challenge of civil society against the Korean state, an event which culminated in the April 26th resignation of Syngman Rhee, the Republic of Korea's first elected president. Amid political and economic instability, the Second Republic held power for just less than two years before it was overtaken by a military coup, led by Major General Park Chung Hee on May 16, 1961. Under the authoritarian regimes of Park Chung Hee (1961-79) and Chun Doo Hwan (1981-87), overseas adoption proliferated due much in part to the principal measures implemented to decrease the population and increase economic development. While war orphans and mixed-race Korean children constituted the first

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<sup>61</sup> Kim, 2010, 44.

<sup>62</sup> Choy, 2013, 85.

<sup>63</sup> Hübinette, 2004, 5.

wave of Korean adoptees, rapid industrialization, urbanization, massive internal migration, and economically instability produced a new population of “adoptable” Korean children: those born to young female factory workers (*yŏgong*) and those who were abandoned or relinquished due to urban poverty, family breakup, disability, neglect, and prostitution.<sup>64</sup>

This period of “militarized modernity” (1963-1987) has been characterized as Park Chung Hee’s regime vision of building the nation by which Korean populace was made into “useful and docile” members through force and Foucauldian discipline.<sup>65</sup> In applying “governmentality” as a conceptual tool, it is possible to perceive how the Korean state managed and exercised control over the body of its populace at the level of state politics and through its governance of conduct of individuals at every level.<sup>66</sup> In the name of national security and economic development, the state relied on “biopower” by instating policies to regulate women’s bodies, births, and deaths. During this time, women were mobilized to be domestic and productive members of society through coercive economic incentives and punitive measures. Additionally, revisions were made to Family Law, emigration policies were enacted, family planning programs were implemented, among other changes. It was under these conditions a new population of “adoptable” children emerged in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s.

Originating from old Japanese Civil Code during the Meiji Restoration, Japanese legal scholars established the basis for what was “authentically” Korea during the colonial period. These Korean “traditions” were born and affirmed through the legislation of Korean family law in 1957, specifically the patriarchal institutions of family-head (*hoju*) and succession of family-

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<sup>64</sup> Tobias Hübinette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture* (Seoul: Jimoondang, 2006).

<sup>65</sup> Seungsook Moon, 2005.

<sup>66</sup> Foucault, 1977.

headship and family register (*hojŏk*). The first revision took place in late 1962, making the husband in every household the head of family in order to restructure family life for efficient administration.<sup>67</sup> Within the larger context of cultivating loyalty to the state and its vision of rapid economic growth and industrial production, the government drew up old virtues of obedience, family values, filial piety, and the leader as father of the nation.<sup>68</sup>

Between 1955 and 1960, the annual increase rate of population growth was 2.88%, one of the highest in the world, and the total fertility rate increased from 5.4 births per woman to 6.33.<sup>69</sup> This rapid population growth was due much in part to the introduction of Western medical technology, the postwar baby boom, and the influx of North Koreans during the war.<sup>70</sup> In 1962, the Korean government enacted an Overseas Emigration Law and set up the Overseas Emigration Bureau within the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. This move was another aim of the government to control population growth within the greater context of national economic development. Additionally, sending Korean workers overseas to areas such as Latin America, Western Europe, Middle East, and the United States guarantee the securement of foreign exchange with remittances sent home by these Koreans living abroad.

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<sup>67</sup> Hyunah Yang, "A Journey of Family Law Reform in Korea: Tradition, Equality, and Social Change." *Journal of Korean Law*, vol. 8 (December 2008): 80.

<sup>68</sup> Bruce Cumings, p. 313.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Han-sik Cho, *Eschatology and Ecology: Experiences of the Korean Church* (Eugene, OR: Regnum Books, 2010).

<sup>70</sup> Chin-thack Soh, *Korea: A Geomedical Monograph of the Republic of Korea* (New York: Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg, 1980).

Functioning in tandem with emigration policies to control population growth, the government launched a family planning program in 1962. This population control policy aimed at lowering the fertility rate by popularizing different forms of contraceptives, offering economic incentives and tax reductions for families who to have fewer children, widespread sterilization



Image 2.3: Calendar images with Korean family planning advertisements. (Left) “Did you know that the most effective, safest, and simplest device is the loop (IUD)? People who want one, please go to a welfare or family planning center.” (1968); (Right) ”Let’s have the proper number of babies, and raise them well!” (1970)

practices, and the legalization of abortion in 1973. Officially in 1974, the government adopted birth control as a national policy as a means to limit population growth. These efforts aimed at ensuring the reproductive activities of women and population increase would not obstruct economic growth, and the remarkable success of the family planning campaign, first initiated under Park Chung Hee’s administration and continuing into the 1980s, was demonstrated in the numbers: in 1960, the average number of children per woman was 6.3, and by 1990, the average dropped to 1.6.<sup>71</sup>

As military security and long-term economic development became the national agenda of the military dictatorship regimes, laws and policies regulating overseas adoption were revised and enacted as well. On September 30, 1961, the Park Chung Hee military government passed Korea’s first modern adoption law, the Orphan Adoption Special Law (*koabyangt’ŭngnyebŏp*), and soon after the Child Welfare Act. Through a stipulation that made all private adoptions illegal, the Korean government was effectively able to create a systematic program in which it

<sup>71</sup> Hübinette, 2004, 6.

would oversee all activities and transactions.<sup>72</sup> Korea Social Service (KSS) began to process international adoptions in 1964, making it the first agency to be entirely run by Koreans. A year later, Child Placement Service reorganized as a private agency, taking the name of Social Welfare Society (SWS), as it is still known as today. By the 1970s, seven adoption agencies engaged in overseas adoption practices, though only Social Welfare Society (SWS), Holt Children’s Service, Korea Social Service (KSS), and Eastern Social Welfare Society (ESWS) continue to operate today.

Figure 2.1: *Current Status of Remaining Adoption Agencies*

<b>Social Welfare Society (SWS)</b>
1954 Established Child Placement Service
1961 Changed its Korean name, but kept its English name
1971 Changed its name to Social Welfare Society
<b>Holt Children’s Services</b>
1956 Established Holt Adoption Program
1972 Changed its name to Holt Children's Services
<b>Korea Social Service (KSS)</b>
1964 Established Korea Social Service
<b>Eastern Social Welfare Society (ESWS)</b>
1971 Established as Christian Crusade in Korea
1972 Started adoption services
1976 Established Eastern Child Welfare Society
1997 Changed its name to Eastern Social Welfare Society

Source: Website of Korea Adoption Services, 2016

During this time, young female factory workers, both single and married, formed the largest pool of birth mothers and were encouraged by the government to relinquish financially burdensome children for overseas adoption.<sup>73</sup> In response to this growing population of “adoptable” children and in order to more effectively manage adoption practices, a 1967 revision

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 138

was enacted, mandating every adoption be regulated and overseen by a Korean government licensed agency and a Western agency, and adoption fees for both were to be paid by adoptive parents. As an alternative to supporting a welfare system to deal with the effects of Korea's compressed development and rapid urbanization, overseas adoption would soon become a cost-saving and even lucrative method, remaining intact as a policy through 1987. The institution continued to grow, and by the end of the 1960s, overseas Korean adoption was recognized on a worldwide scale. Yet, it should be noted that there were concerted efforts made by the Korean government and private organizations to develop a domestic adoption project and a long-term foster care project in tandem with the activities of overseas adoption. As Child Placement Service launched a campaign, Foster One Orphan per Family, as a private and independent effort toward developing Korea's child welfare projects, the Korean government also enacted laws that prioritized domestic adoption practices. This led to an increase in the number of domestic adoptions by the mid-1960s. The government enacted and revised policies to support domestic adoption activities in Korea. However, Foster One Orphan depended heavily on international aid, leading to the eventual termination and failure of this program.

With the ongoing antagonism and struggle for legitimacy between North and South Korea serving as the backdrop, South Korea's institution of overseas adoption became a focal point of criticism for the South Korean government. The North Korean media openly mocked the South for selling its children to Westerners for profit, dismissing the South's overseas adoption practices as an example of flunkeyism (*sadaejui*), which stood in stark contrast to the North Korean ideology of self-reliance (*chuch'e*). In response, the South temporarily refocused its efforts on promoting domestic adoption, and in 1976, Orphan Adoption Special Law was

renamed Special Adoption Law (*Ibyangt'ŭngnyebŏp*), domestic adoption and foster care were made easier, and the government announced overseas adoption would be phased out by 1981.<sup>74</sup>

### **Overseas Korean Adoption as an Industry**

The assassination of President Park Chung Hee by his own intelligence chief in 1979, however, halted these plans. While Korea experience a short period of political liberalization following the assassination, this liberalizations was ended by the military coup (12.12) led by Chun Doo Hwan on December 12, 1979. Chun Doo Hwan was officially inaugurated into office on September 1, 1980 as the 5th President of South Korea. This same year, the new government discontinued the 1976 policy on overseas adoption due mainly to its failure to increase the numbers of domestic adoptions. What once was a practice strictly regulated by the Korean government became part of the non-governmental foreign policy (*mingan oegyo*), and it was from this point that overseas adoption became deregulated.<sup>75</sup> The intention of this new approach to overseas adoption was to increase emigration and cultivate stronger ties with its Western allies, and the adoption quota system was officially abolished. This deregulation signaled a new era in overseas adoption practices: an era in which agencies transformed into profit-making businesses, and the institution of overseas Korean adoption, which had once begun as a rescue mission, transformed into an international industry driven by the demand for adoptable children. Between 1984 and 1988, the numbers of overseas Korean adoption peaked with 6,500-9,000 cases a year.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 10.



## 1988 Summer Olympics: A Turning Point in Overseas Korean Adoption Practices

Though the Koreans enjoy showing off their country to the world during these Games, there are some aspects of their society they'd prefer we'd not examine so closely, and one of those concerns the exportation of Korean orphans for adoption abroad.<sup>77</sup>

—Bryant Gumbel, *NBC* (1988)

Some 6,000 children were sent to the United States for adoption last year alone. It's a form of export that many Koreans would rather not talk about. They feel perhaps it's embarrassing, perhaps even a national shame.<sup>78</sup>

—David Diaz, *NBC* (1988)

Until the Olympics end, it will be stopped," said Joo Gee Jong, head of the child welfare department in South Korea's Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, which regulates overseas adoptions..."We're trying to discourage the abroad adoptions because of the bad press from abroad," Joo said. The South Korean government has been stung by reports that the country supplies nearly 60 percent of the about 10,000 foreign children adopted in the United States each year.<sup>79</sup>

— Peter Leyden and David Bank, *News/Sun-Sentinel* (1988)

Following the nationwide June Democracy Movement of 1987, Korea experienced a series of democratic reforms, including direct presidential elections and the restoration of civil liberties. Within this context, the 1988 Summer Olympic Games in Seoul served as an opportunity for Korea to showcase its newly democratized and industrialized status to the world. While reporting on Korea's economic and political progress, a number of journalists, through television reports and newspaper articles, also highlighted the darker features of Korean society, such as Korean sweatshops, urban poor, prostitutes, and adoption of Korean children by foreigners.<sup>80</sup> An article in a 1988 issue of the *New York Times* questioned why South Korea, a nation that boasts skyscrapers, giant factories, and the 1988 Summer Olympic Games, has continued to support the idea of foreign adoptions, as well as licensed adoption agencies and

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<sup>77</sup> Bryant Gumbel, coverage of 1988 Seoul Olympics, *NBC*, September 1988.

<sup>78</sup> David Diaz, coverage of 1988 Seoul Olympics, *NBC*, September 1988.

<sup>79</sup> Peter Leyden and David Bank, "Olympics Block Flow Of Korean Orphans To U.S.," *News/Sun-Sentinel*, August 14, 1988.

<sup>80</sup> Susan Chira, "U.S. Olympic Reporting Hits a Raw Korean Nerve," *New York Times*, September 28, 1988, A1 33.

unwed mothers' homes that supply babies for overseas adoption.<sup>81</sup> Korea was depicted as a “baby-selling” nation, leading the world in the export of babies.<sup>82</sup>

These international reports led to a public outcry among Korean politicians and everyday citizens who deemed the coverage by the foreign press as unfairly negative. The *Dong-A Ilbo*, a leading Korean daily newspaper, responded to these reports by writing, “The American press has to know that this kind of distorted reporting is hurting the dignity of Korean people who have been preparing for the Olympics for seven years and is fanning anti-American sentiment.”<sup>83</sup> In addition to this shaming by Western journalists, North Korea continued to publicly criticize South Korea’s adoption practices in its own media. Humiliated by this international shaming by the Western media and North Korean state, the South Korean government responded by temporarily suspending the sending of Korean children abroad. The following year, new guidelines for the improvement of Korea’s adoption policy and practices were issued with the goal of completely phasing out overseas adoptions by 1996. Adoption agencies were criticized for their high fees for both domestic and overseas adoptions, and tax incentives were offered to Korean couples in order to encourage domestic adoption.

### **Adoption Practices and Policies in the 1990s to Present**

In August 1994, this second plan to phase out overseas adoption by 1996 was discarded. Domestic adoptions remained low, residential care facilities were brimming with children, and there remained a great demand overseas for adoptable Korean children. Instead, the government

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<sup>81</sup> Susan Chira, “Babies for Export: And Now the Painful Questions,” *New York Times* (21 April 1988) A4.

<sup>82</sup> Matthew Rothschild, “Baby for Sale. South Koreans Make Them, Americans Can Buy Them,” *Progressive* 52, no. 1 (1988): 18-23.

<sup>83</sup> Chira, September 1988.

aimed to annually decrease its number of overseas adoptions by 3-5 percent while also establishing a deadline of 2015 to end overseas adoption practices.<sup>84</sup> The following year, adoption law was changed to its present name, Special Law on Adoption Promotion and Procedure (*Ibyangch'okjin mit chölch'a e kwanhan t'üngnyeböp*). A gradual decline in overseas Korean adoption was abruptly reversed with the 1997 IMF Crisis, which led to mass unemployment, unparalleled rises in poverty, diminished social services, rising school dropouts, increasing suicide rates, divorce, and domestic violence.<sup>85</sup> This crisis and its effects led to overflowing orphanages throughout the nation. In 1996, five thousand children were placed in state care. That number doubled in 1998, prompting the Ministry of Health and Welfare to announce it had “no choice but to make changes to recent policy which sought to restrict the number of children adopted overseas.”<sup>86</sup>

Another trend that emerged since the 1990s was a shift toward unwed mothers as the main source for adoptable children.<sup>87</sup> While the practice of overseas adoption was initially designed and developed as a response to the post-war orphan and mixed-race child crisis, by 1988, only 8% of children adopted overseas came from orphanages. From the 1990-2003, 90% of all overseas adopted children were relinquished by unwed mothers.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Hübinette, 2004, 12.

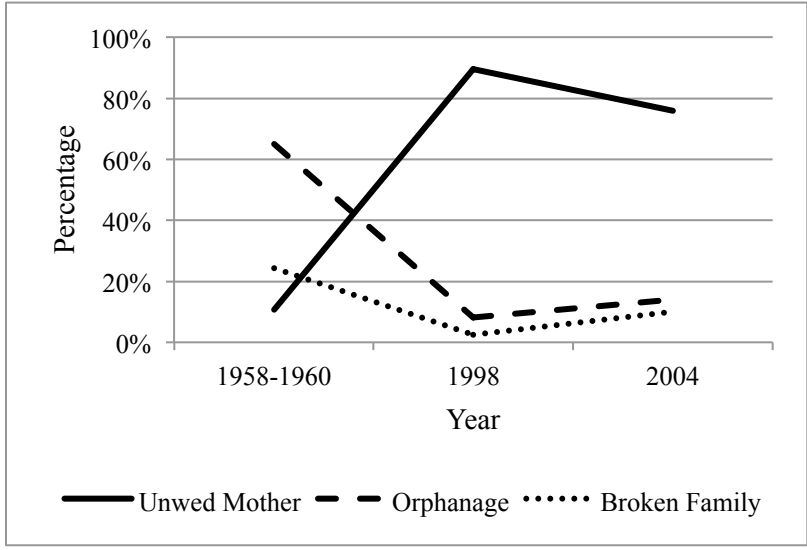
<sup>85</sup> Jesook Song, *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis: The Creation of a Neoliberal Welfare Society* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>86</sup> Kim, 2010, 64.

<sup>87</sup> Paul Y. Chang and Andrea Kim Cavicchi, “Claiming Rights: Organizational and Discursive Strategies of the Korean Adoptee and Unwed Mothers Movement,” *Korea Observer* 46, 1 (Spring 2015): 207.

<sup>88</sup> For a lengthy discussion on unwed mothers in Korea, see Chapter 4.

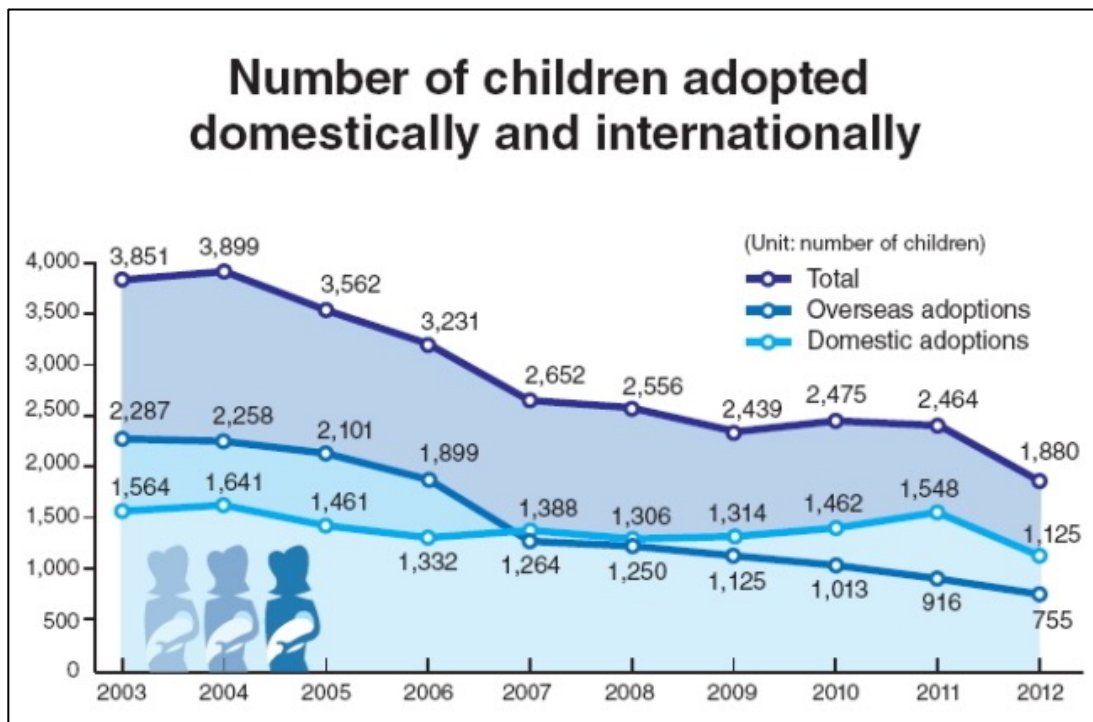
Figure 2.2: *Origins of Children Adopted Overseas*



Source: Chang and Cavicchi, 2015<sup>1</sup>

While the number of overseas adoptions has experienced a steady decline in the 2000s, the Korean government, for a third time, overturned its plan to phase out overseas adoption practices. The government launched a campaign in an effort to promote and increase the number of domestic adoptions while reducing Korea's reliance on overseas couples to adopt Korean children. The government's announcement in 2006 to designate May 11th as Adoption Day in order to raise awareness of and promote adoption by Korean families is one action of this campaign.

Figure 2.3: Number of Korean Children Adopted Domestically and Internationally



Source: *The Korea Herald* (2015)<sup>89</sup>

In July of 2009, Korea Central Adoption Resources (KCARE) was officially launched, serving as Korea’s new central adoption authority that would oversee all activities related to adoption, promote domestic adoption, and provide post-adoption services. Two years later, the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea changed the name of the Special Law Relating to the Promotion and Process of Adoption to Special Adoption Law (*Ibyangt’üngnyeöböp*). In 2013, the Ministry of Health and Welfare signed the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, setting the stage for it to be ratified and implemented. To prepare for this ratification, the government took preliminary steps by enacting Special Adoption Law revisions in 2011 and

<sup>89</sup> Lee, Claire, “Birth Mothers Living in Silence” *The Korea Herald*, January 28, 2015 (Data collected from Ministry of Health and Welfare, Korea (2013))

implementing them in 2012.<sup>90</sup> These revisions aimed at the following: to prioritize domestic adoption over overseas adoption; strengthen post adoption services in the countries of adoption; focus on family preservation and improving the adoption system in order to protect the rights of the child; support domestic and overseas adult adoptee organizations. These revisions also noted that Korea Central Adoption Resources (KCARE) would have a new name: Korea Adoption Services (KAS). Along with its new name, KAS would acquire greater responsibilities, such as maintaining a central database of adoptees' records, providing original family search services, and building a cooperative system among adoption agencies.

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<sup>90</sup> The revisions to Special Adoption Law were tremendously significant in that they were drafted and submitted by a coalition of overseas Korean adopted adults, unwed and single mothers, original mothers who have lost their children to adoption, and a number of other key allies. For more on this coalition and key law revisions to Special Adoption Law, see Chapter 4.

Figure 2.4: Number of Overseas Korean Adoptions by Year (1953-2014)

Year	No.	Year	No.	Year	No.	Year	No.	Year	No.	Year	No.
1953	4	1964	462	1975	5,077	1986	8,680	1997	2,057	2008	1,250
1954	8	1965	451	1976	6,597	1987	7,947	1998	2,443	2009	1,125
1955	59	1966	494	1977	6,159	1988	6,463	1999	2,409	2010	1,013
1956	671	1967	626	1978	5,917	1989	4,191	2000	2,360	2011	916
1957	486	1968	949	1979	4,148	1990	2,962	2001	2,436	2012	755
1958	930	1969	1,190	1980	4,144	1991	2,197	2002	2,365	2013	236
1959	741	1970	1,932	1981	4,628	1992	2,045	2003	2,287	2014	370
1960	638	1971	2,725	1982	6,434	1993	2,290	2004	2,258	<i>Total</i>	<b>165,973<sup>91</sup></b>
1961	660	1972	3,490	1983	7,263	1994	2,262	2005	1,630		
1962	254	1973	4,688	1984	7,924	1995	2,180	2006	1,899		
1963	442	1974	5,302	1985	8,837	1996	2,080	2007	1,264		

Source: Ministry of Health and Welfare, Korea (2015)

<sup>91</sup> According to Korea's Ministry of Health and Welfare, a total of 165,973 overseas adoptions were handled between the years of 1953 and 2014. However, this number only includes those adoption registered through the Korean government and not does take into account the thousands of adoptions that were facilitated by private parties, religious organizations, and the U.S. military. Additionally, a great number of unrecorded, illegal adoptions have been reported. Some adoption experts and scholars believe the number is significantly higher at about 200,000 to 250,000 Korean children adopted overseas.

## SECTION II: The Return of Adult Korean Adoptees to Korea

In terms of my first impression, it was exactly what I expected. I expected a very progressive country that still had some old flavor to it. Korea hasn't let me down in that way.

– Jesse Knipling, adoptee raised in the U.S. (Interview 2014)

[For non-adopted people] who are born into this world, into a family, you have all the generations of knowledge that shape you as a person, and you don't have that invisible feeling, like being a ghost. I realized that I had nothing to pass on to my kids, and it was like I was passing on this legacy of nothingness. So it really motivated me to delve into, not just my adoptedness, but to embrace my Koreanness and [return to Korea].

–Sona Renker, adoptee raised in the U.S. (Interview 2012)

### Adult Adoptees as “Overseas” Koreans

Beginning in the late 1990s, adult adoptees began returning to their birth country to participate in motherland tours, search for birth families, teach English, study Korean, attend conferences for overseas Korean adoptees, and for a number of other reasons. It has been estimated by adoptee organizations in Korea that since the early 2000s, approximately 3,000 to 5,000 adult adoptees return to their birth country each year for short-term or long-term visits or to reside. According to G.O.A.'L, there are approximately 500 adult adoptees who currently reside in Korea. However, this estimate only includes adoptees who have participated in G.O.A.'L events or accessed its services and does not account for the great many who remain uninvolved with G.O.A.'L or other adoptee organizations in Korea.

As argued in previous studies, overseas Korean adoptees were officially welcomed back to their country of birth as “overseas Koreans,” a designation that encompasses any individual with ethnic Korean background who resides overseas.<sup>92</sup> Efforts to draw diasporic Koreans back to Korea, mainly from developed Western nations, were part of the Korean government's state-sponsored *segzehwa* project—a globalization campaign, led by President Kim Young Sam, with a strong nationalist sentiment. First announced in 1995, *segzehwa* policies began a process of

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<sup>92</sup> Kim, 2010.



building a global Korean network as a way to reach out to Koreans living abroad.<sup>93</sup> During a 1999 gathering for overseas Korean adoptees, Lee Hee-ho, the wife of former President Kim Dae-jung, addressed the adoptees through a video speaking in Korean with English subtitles. The former First Lady highlighted their Korean ethnic roots and encouraged these adoptees to “forget your difficult past and renew your relations with your native country in order to work together toward common goals based on the blood ties that cannot be severed.”<sup>94</sup> As a competing force in the international market economy, the South Korean state has pursued a national project that rewrites overseas Korean adoptees back into its narrative of globalization by emphasizing shared racial ethnicity and strong blood ties. However, the motives of the state have often come in tension with the lived experiences of the adult adoptees in their country of birth, “opening up the possibility for resistant practices and alternative senses of belonging.”<sup>95</sup>

#### **F-4 Visa and Dual Citizenship for Adult Adoptee Returnees**

##### *F-4 Visa*

One factor that contributed to the return and resettlement of adult adoptees in Korea was the creation of the F-4 visa. In 1999, Global Overseas Adoptees’ Link (G.O.A.’L), an adoptee-run, service-based organization for adoptee returnees in Seoul, successfully lobbied the Korean government to have adoptees included in the Overseas Koreans Act, which granted adoptees and other select overseas ethnic Korean groups F-4 visa status upon approval from the Korean Immigration Office. Originally, this visa was offered to only those ethnic Koreans from

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<sup>93</sup> Hyun Ok Park, “*Segyehwa*: Globalization and Nationalism in Korea,” *The Journal of the International Institute* 4, 1 (Fall 1996).

<sup>94</sup> Eleana J. Kim, “Wedding Citizenship And Culture: Korean Adoptees and the Global Family of Korea,” *Social Text*, 21.1 (2003) 68.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

“developed,” predominantly Western countries, but this was ruled unconstitutional in 2001. In 2008, the law was revised and issued to Chinese Koreans. Yet, qualification for the F-4 visa for Chinese and other previously restricted nationalities requires proof of a high-ranking company position or college degree. Korean adoptees from the earliest years of the creation of the F-4 visa, however, were ruled as eligible for this visa due mainly to their overseas adoptions to developed “first world” Western nations.

The F-4 visa has played a pivotal role in determining not only the duration adoptees are allowed to stay but also how they can choose to spend their time in Korea. The majority of foreigners from Western nations return to Korea on a sponsored E-2 visa, which is required in order to teach English in Korea. One limitation of the E-2 visa is that it ties the visa holder to the employer who sponsored it, causing a number of issues to arise in the case of a conflict with the employer. Whether or not Korean adoptees hold positions as English teachers, they have the option of applying for the F-4 visa, allowing them a greater amount of flexibility and freedom than non-F-4 visa holders. Jesse Knipling, an American adoptee who had been residing in Korea for almost two years at the time we spoke, shared an experience involving a dispute with his former employer. His boss refused to pay him two months’ wages, prompting Knipling to quit. “With the F-4 visa, I had the luxury of being able to quit right away. But if I were Caucasian and tied to that company with another visa, it would have been much harder.” Living comfortably off his savings from a previous job as a computer programmer in the U.S., Jesse added, “I have the option of being a vagrant in Korea, which I have been greatly enjoying!” Access to the F-4 visa has, without a question, played a significant role in the return, resettlement, and livelihoods of adult adoptees in Korea.

## *Dual Citizenship*

In 2007, G.O.A.'L launched a second campaign in which it petitioned for dual citizenship on behalf of Korean adoptee returnees. The argument on which this campaign was founded was that adoptees involuntarily renounced their Korean nationality upon their adoption overseas, and for symbolic and legal purposes, they should be allowed to reclaim their Korean nationality, as well as maintain their adoptive nationality. On April 4, 2010, the Nationality Law Revision was passed by the Korean National Assembly, which gave overseas Korean adoptees the right dual citizenship. A year later, thirteen Korean adoptees from multiple countries participated in the first ever ceremony celebrating the nation's revised Nationality Act. One of the original thirteen adoptees in this cohort who was adopted to Switzerland at age six spoke of his new hybrid sense of self: "In the past I embraced a Korean identity but wasn't able to 'prove' it by showing a passport or ID. That's not an issue any longer."<sup>96</sup>

It should be noted that only those adoptees who hold an F-4 visa and have resided in Korea for an extended period of time are eligible to apply, and the process takes six months or sometimes longer. Nevertheless, this was a symbolic victory for these adult adoptees, especially significant in that they were the first overseas adoptees of any country to regain citizenship to their country of birth. Whereas adoption legally represents a severance of ties—an erasure—from one country to another, the reclamation of Korean nationality means reestablishing those ties and filling in the erasures. One American adoptee with whom I spoke who thought favorably about reclaiming his Korean Nationality articulated to me, "My Korean citizenship, my name, my birth family, and my language were all taken away from me the day I was sent to America. I think it's my right to have Korean citizenship. I never had a say in giving it up in the first place."

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<sup>96</sup> Elizabeth Woyke, "More Korean Adoptees Apply for Dual Citizenship," *Hyphen Magazine* (online) August 15, 2012. Available from <http://hyphenmagazine.com/blog/2012/8/15/more-korean-adoptees-apply-dual-citizenship>.

## **Motherland Tour Programs to Korea**

Adoptees have been returning to Korea through a number of different outlets, though one of the most common initial means of return has been through a motherland tour program. A number of organizations and adoption agencies currently offer adult Korean adoptees a number of homeland trips from which to choose, often referred to as “motherland tours” by the organizers and participants. Some of the programs are limited to adoptees over the age of eighteen, while others welcome adoptees of all ages, adoptive parents, siblings, and spouses. These programs also vary in length, although the majority last for approximately two weeks, and the costs of the tour range from a couple hundred US dollars to several thousand per person. The itineraries of these programs typically include a full schedule of sightseeing to Korea’s most popular tourist destinations, a visit to an orphanage, and the option to meet with a social worker from their adoption agency. During this meeting, adoptees may request to have their files reviewed with a social worker from their adoption agency and pursue a search if sufficient information is available. However, the main focus of these tours is tourism with an emphasis on reacquainting adoptees with Korean culture and exploring their roots.

Holt was the first agency to establish tours for adoptees back to their countries of birth starting in 1975, and for decades, Holt International Heritage Tour has been one of the most well known programs for Korean adoptees who wished to return to Korea.<sup>97</sup> Offered to adoptees of all ages and their families, this tour includes popular sightseeing highlights, a visit to Holt’s facilities, and the option to view one’s own adoption file. Holt International provides adoptees a cultural bridge between Korea and their adoptive countries and, prior to the proliferation of other program options and networks that easily facilitated the visit of adoptees to Korea, its homeland

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<sup>97</sup> Robin Munro, “More Than Camps and Tours,” Holt International Blog, Holt International, November 18, 2013, <http://holtinternational.org/blog/2013/11/more-than-camps-and-tours/>.

tour was one of the only feasible ways adoptees could return to their country of birth.<sup>98</sup> However, it should be noted that Holt has also faced criticism for “infantilizing” adoptees in its attempt to “reeducate” participants on Korean culture and society through their heritage programs.<sup>99</sup>

One of the adoptees who participated on Holt’s heritage tour described this experience to me as “paternalistic” and “overly didactic.” Activities for this heritage tours, as described by Elise Prébin, include mandatory cooking, culture, language, history, and *t’aekwōndo* classes, and participants are awarded diplomas upon completion. Prébin argues that the very structure of this program employs a strategy that validates adoptees’ separation from Korean culture and society rather than achieving the goal of integration, all while treating adults as young pupils. As is the focus of Chapter Three, G.O.A.’L’s First Trip Home (FTH) program, an annual eleven-day tour coordinated and run by adult adoptees who reside in Korea, serves as an alternative to the forced “reeducation” tours run by the agencies. Regardless of the nature of the motherland tour programs, however, they have functioned as one of the earliest and most common means by which Korean adoptees can return to their country of birth.

### **Returning as English Teachers in Private After-School Academies (*hagwōn*)**

The giant problem for a lot of adoptees who want to live here is, of course, long-term employment...meaningful employment. If you’re a teacher, that’s great. If you want to teach, that’s great. If you don’t want to teach, that sucks. Also, if you are a teacher, the probability of you learning Korean goes down because you are literally paid not to speak Korean.”

– Jes Eriksen, adoptee raised in Denmark (Interview 2014)

Another key part of *segvehwa* initiated by President Kim Young Sam was the push to

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<sup>98</sup> The majority of my adopted interviewees reported that prior to the proliferation of adoptee-run organizations, adoptee conferences, and a large online presence of Korean adoptee groups, the thought of returning to Korea had not even crossed their minds. For those who had considered a return trip, a heritage tour program offered by adoption agencies was the only viable option outside of an independent trip.

<sup>99</sup> For more on Holt International tour programs for Korean adoptees, see Elise Prébin, “Three-Week Re-Education to Koreanness.” *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 7.2 (2008): 323-355.

extend English-language education to elementary school classrooms, which, ironically, involved placing a three-year ban (1997-2000) on private after-school academies (*hagwŏn*). However, with the IMF Crisis leading to the amplification of neoliberal social policies, among them education, the ban was lifted, and consumer demand for education triumphed.<sup>100</sup> Situated within the broader “education fever” (*kyoyuk yŏl*), this demand has continued to soar, and the practical and symbolic value of English in Korea has evolved into a class marker. In just one year, the size of the English education market in South Korea was estimated at over 4 trillion won (about \$3.33 billion USD), and by 1997, already 70% of children in Seoul were participating in the English market.<sup>101</sup> The ubiquity of private after-school English academies (*yŏng’ŏ hagwŏn*) has led to the concurrent demand for native English speaking teachers with university degrees from Western nations. Through this medium and also within the public education system, thousands of adult Korean adoptees have been able to return to Korea through procuring an English teaching position in Korea.

Kim Stoker, an American adoptee who has resided in Korea for nearly a total of ten years, first returned to Korea as an English teacher in 1995, when the English education market had only recently begun to develop. Among the adoptees I interviewed who have resided in Seoul for an extended period of time (five years or more), Stoker was one of the first adoptees to have returned and resettled in her country of birth through a somewhat fortuitous sequence of events after graduating from college: “I had always wanted to travel,” Stoker recounted to me. “I had a friend who was living in Japan and applied to the JET [Japan Exchange and Teaching] program, but I didn’t get in. This friend had given me a book about teaching English in Asia. I went

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<sup>100</sup> Park, So Jin, and Nancy Abelmann, “Class and Cosmopolitan Striving: Mothers' Management of English Education in South Korea,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 77, 4 (2004): 650.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 646.

through it, typed up a bunch of letters, sent them off, got a reply from a *hagwŏn* in Korea, and then there I was.” Landing at a reputable *hagwŏn* in an affluent part of Seoul, Stoker taught English for a year before moving onto a university teaching position in Haejeon, a town thirty-three miles south of Seoul, where she taught for two years. After a three-year stint in Hawaii to complete a MA program in Asian Studies, Stoker returned and resettled once again in Seoul where she has remained ever since.

### **Korean University Language Programs**

Studying Korean through a Korean language program has not only extended the stays of many adoptees in Korea, including myself, but it has also been used as a means for adoptees to return to Korea for the first time. The first Korean language institute to provide intensive Korean language courses was established by Yonsei University in 1959. However, it only until adult adoptees began returning to Korea in large numbers that these programs, through government subsidies, offered adoptees full or partial scholarships to study the Korean language. Adoptee organizations, such as G.O.A.’L and INKAS, also accept applications and offer government-sponsored scholarships to cover the tuition costs of programs at Ewha Womans University, Korea University, KyungHee University, Sogang University, Sookmyung Women’s University, and Yonsei University. Offering six or seven levels, ranging from Beginner to Advanced, these programs are divided into four quarters and held Monday through Friday from 9am to 1pm.

There is no single reason for why adoptees choose to pursue Korean language study. One adoptee whom I interviewed told me one of her motivations behind learning Korean was being able to “curse out taxi drivers in Korean when they try to swindle me,” while another adoptee casually remarked, “Once I know some Korean, it will help me in the dating department.” For

others, the acquisition of Korean language skills is seen as a way to develop deeper connections with original family members with whom they were in reunion. Ellwyn Kauffmann, an American adoptee who first met his family in 2000, expressed the challenges of not being able to verbally communicate with his Korean mother:

I like talking with people, basically telling stories and letting them tell stories, and we connect that way. It's something I haven't been able to do yet with my birth mother. I want to have a meaningful conversation with her and am really going to make an effort to learn [Korean] instead of relying on gestures and body language like a four-year-old, which is probably why she sent me clothing that fit a four-year-old one time. (laughs)

After studying the Korean language for a year in a program based in Los Angeles, CA, Ellwyn made the decision to relocate to Seoul to attend Sogang University's Korean Language Institute as a full-time student. As one of the interview participants with whom I am still in contact, Ellwyn has often expressed his frustrations with not being able to learn Korean as quickly as he expected; however, his ability has noticeably improved, and he is now able to have basic conversations with his Korean mother.

Studying the Korean language for other adoptees during their first trip back to Korea proved incidental. This was the case for Nik Leschly. Originally adopted to Denmark, but whose family moved to Northern California shortly after his adoption, Leschly recalled how, throughout different periods of his childhood, his parents would ask if would ever want to return to Korea. He never seriously considered returning until presented with a study abroad opportunity in college. As a student who had studied the Spanish language, however, his first choice was Spain: "The problem was that everyone in the California state university system also wanted to go to Spain. I really wanted to make sure I could study abroad as an international business major, so I thought, well, Korea's also on that list, maybe I'll put Korea down." With only three other applicants to Korea, Leschly was selected and soon found himself studying the Korean language



and other subjects at Yonsei University. Over a decade later, Leschly continues to reside in Seoul, recently married a Korean woman whom he met while in a graduate degree program at Sogang University. He holds the Secretary General position at Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (G.O.A.'L), regularly engages in adoptees rights advocacy work, and has proactively worked toward "carving out a place for the adoptee community in Korea."

### **"Linguistic and Cross-Cultural Code Switching**

I can survive with the little I know. For example, there's a convenient store near my place. The employees working there, because we see each other so often, they're often super nice to me. But my life will be so much easier once I start taking Korean classes. I hope to have real conversations with them.

—Pauline Pierre, adoptee raised in France (Interview 2013)

There's the little things that are nice here, like I don't get stared at for looking different...well, that's as long as I don't open my mouth because I can't speak Korean well.

— Johnny Lindberg, adoptee raised in the U.S. (Interview 2013)

Daily interactions, or everyday "tactics," as coined by de Certeau, refer to the ways that individuals react to situations in limited ways, adapt to an environment, or navigate cultural imposed systems. The study and use of the Korean language, for example, constitutes a form of consumption that does not necessarily imply passivity on the part of the consumer. Korean adoptees who partially or fully acquire Korean language skills often utilize language in particular ways that are functional to their specific ends. Among those adoptees who have developed an understanding of Korean culture and the Korean language, these practices are common and illustrate the opportunistic and even defensive methods adoptees employ in order to navigate spaces in Korea. In this way, I argue that the subtle ways adoptees have utilized language for their own comfort or survival reflects a form of everyday resistance.

The topic of Korean language was one of the recurrent themes that appeared in nearly all of my interviews with both adopted and non-adopted individuals. Solhee Han, a non-adopted

Korean volunteer at G.O.A.'L, shared with me her perspective on why language is one of the main challenges for adult adoptees in Korea. "Adoptees look Korean, so people expect them to speak Korean and know how Korea works. And many Koreans still don't know [adoptees] exist, so they can be kind of rude to adoptees when adoptees don't understand something." When I asked Han how adoptees could overcome these challenges, she responded that adoptees should be able to choose wherever they want to live; however, if they choose to remain in Korea, they should learn the language. "It's just like for anyone, even just like a German-German who decides to stay here. They have to learn Korean because they made that choice."

For others, however, adoptees' reacquisition of the Korean language symbolized something far greater. One individual who spoke extensively on this topic was Laura Klunder, an adoptee from the U.S. who was working at KoRoot while also investing much of her time in adoptee rights activism and social justice issues. When I asked her to speak about her experiences learning the Korean language, she shared with me the following:

The Korean language being taken away [from me] still feels so devastating. My family, my language, my culture, everything was taken away. There was this gravity of not having the language, and I was reminded of that anytime I was studying Korean verb tenses in the Korean language institute...Some of us figure out ways to [learn Korean] with our blood, sweat, and tears, but it felt like an injustice that Korean was taken away so easily, and now no one knows how to put it back.

As a professional with a background in social work, Klunder said one of her biggest concerns involving Korean language learning is that the Korean language institutes are not designed to teach adoptees the language: "They do not address where adoptees are at in the process. We are not blank slates. There's a lot going on behind our learning, and there's no acknowledgment of that."

Yet, there were other Korean language learners who approached the Korean language in distinctly different ways. One American adoptee, who wished to remain anonymous in my written project,<sup>102</sup> discussed how he has alternated between Korean and English, depending on the social interaction and cultural context:

Life has been a lot less annoying since I've learned Korean. I like being able to use both [languages] to my advantage...like, there was this foreigner who asked me for directions, and I acted like I didn't know English because I didn't feel like answering. But then I've also pretended I don't know any Korean, like this one time when I didn't want to deal with a drunk *ajössi* (middle-aged man).

Through this revelation, we see how this adoptee performs linguistic and cross-cultural code switching as a tactical mode of practice on a daily basis. Linguistic code switching is a concept that focuses on the shifts from one language to another when managing conflict, desiring to fit in, wishing to say something in secret, conveying a thought due to a lexical gap, among other circumstances, all which represent “a marker of their bi- or multicultural identity.”<sup>103</sup> Cross-cultural code switching refers to a method individuals employ to function appropriately in a wide variety of cultural situations.<sup>104</sup> It may involve changing from one form of behavior to another in order to create a desired social impression.

In a personal reflection piece published online, Matthew Salesses recounts a handful of times, as an adopted Korean who was raised by white parents in the United States, that he has navigated various cultural spaces and modify his behavior accordingly.<sup>105</sup> As one of the only

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<sup>102</sup> A handful of my interview participants agreed to do interviews but opted to remain anonymous in my dissertation.

<sup>103</sup> Winnie Tang, “Code Switching,” in *Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Mary Yu Danico, 237-239 (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2014): 238.

<sup>104</sup> Andrew Molinsky, “Cross-Cultural Code-Switching: The Psychological Challenges of Adapting Behavior in Foreign Cultural Interactions,” *Academy of Management Review* 32, 2 (2007): 622.

<sup>105</sup> Matthew Salesses, “The Overwhelming Nature Of Code-Switching,” *NPR*. June 2, 2013.

non-white English teachers in his Korean-based English academy, he found himself code switching, often feeling compelled to agree with the teachers' complaints of Korean culture, people, and society when, in actuality, he neither agreed nor disagreed. Many of my interview participants also reflected on similar experiences, as well as those experiences in which applied cultural adaptation methods through single interactions with Koreans for more long-term adjustment goals. Jae Howell, a Korea adoptee from the United States who has been living in Seoul for fifteen years, shared an anecdote involving an awkward experience at a Korean bathhouse (*mokyoktang*) with his Korean uncles. "I walked in, and of course everyone's naked. Then they handed me a sponge to scrub my oldest uncle's back. It was so uncomfortable, but I did it." Raised in what he calls a "typical American household in Alabama," he never had even a remotely similar experience. Yet, in engaging in this act, he demonstrated his ability to deviate from his culturally ingrained American behavior in order to accommodate different cultural norms deemed appropriate by his Korean uncles.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provided a historical overview of adoption practices in Korea, including the return and resettlement of adult adoptees in their country of birth. Throughout each section, I demonstrated how power manifests itself in laws, restrictions, and programs, and how multiple actors have practice resistance against it. One example was how orphans and mixed-race children were subjected to "biopower" following the Korean War. This involved a process in which the Korean government determined who constituted a desirable versus undesirable member of society. Power also assumed the form of U.S. paternalist rescue efforts of poor, Korean children through humanitarian discourse. During the period of "militarized modernization, institutions

were established in order to discipline individuals and produce citizens with “docile bodies,” specifically women factory workers and unwed mothers.

This chapter also situated the return of Korean adoptees to Korea within the history of overseas Korean adoption. I presented the historical backdrop and circumstances that have facilitated the return and resettlement process. The collective return to a country from where adoptees were once considered “undesirable” or as a detriment to the development of the nation is, in fact, an act of resistance. Kim Stoker articulated, “They never expected us to return when they sent us away. And even when we were welcomed back, they weren’t prepared for us.” The programs and policies that have been established by the Korean government and adoption agencies in order to facilitate the transnational movement of adoptees to and from their country of birth, reflect Korea’s desire for reconciliation—one that represents the nation’s shame and guilt over relinquishing its children to adoptions overseas. Free Korean language scholarships, motherland tours, and other incentives are presented as a means to draw adoptees back to their country of birth. To this end, adoptees are incorporated into Korean society only to the extent the state, adoption agencies, and other Korean bodies consider this incorporation appropriate and advantageous for themselves. Even with the pleas and demands made by adult adoptees in Korea, one of their most fundamental needs is left unattended: access to their adoption files and assistance with original family search. This topic will be discussed at great length in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Original Family Search and Adoptees' Rights to Their Records**

The first moment that I thought about looking is when I had my first child...that moment, I can imagine, not being able to provide for your children and having to give them up, it must be the hardest thing to do as a parent. That to me is such a devastating experience. So that was the moment I decided that I needed to search for my birth family.

–Jinsook Boer, adoptee raised in the Netherlands (Interview 2013)

My mom had a good a relationship with the adoption agency, and the director of the adoption agency sent her an email about a motherland tour. [My mom] had sent me a package a few days before with my adoption papers, and I had one of those “ah-ha!” epiphany moments. So I got a call a couple weeks later saying I got selected, and they were like, do you want us to search for your biological parents? I was like, you know what? Excuse my language, but I was like, fu\*k it, alright [laughs]. And so I did it, I went on the trip. I never expected them to find my birthmom when I was there, but they did.

–Brian Conyer, adoptee raised in the U.S. (Interview 2013)

### **Introduction**

On the first Monday and Tuesday of September 2013, eighteen adult Korean adoptees flew separately into Incheon International Airport to participate in the eleven-day First Trip Home (FTH) program, an annual tour held by Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (G.O.A.'L). G.O.A.'L staff members and volunteers eagerly greeted participants at the arrival gate, assisted them with their luggage, and led them to the SK and LG Telecom counters at the airport to rent mobile phones for the duration of their stay. Some of the travelers appeared weary from their lengthy flights, while others were brimming with energy. The participants ranged from ages nineteen to forty-three, representing six different nationalities and diverse backgrounds. What connected these eighteen individuals were three common factors: all had been born in Korea and adopted overseas as infants or young children, this was their first time returning to their country of birth since their adoption, and they all sought to reunite with their Korean families of origin.

In other words, these adoptees chose to apply to First Trip Home knowing that the cornerstone of the program was assistance and support with original family search<sup>106</sup>.

In order for participants to become acquainted with each other and the G.O.A.'L staff prior to the trip, a G.O.A.'L staff member had set up a private Facebook group months earlier. None of the participants, with the exception of two sisters, knew each other before their arrival, and yet they would share some of their most vulnerable and emotional moments with each other in the days to come. These moments would include reuniting with foster parents or sharing their adoption stories on a national television program in the hope that a Korean family member would identify them. For others, visiting the street location where they had been found abandoned as infants turned out to be the most significant portion of the trip. Countless times up to the start of FTH, the participants were made aware of the exhausting nature of this tour and low probability of a successful reunion. However, each and every one of them was willing to take that chance in order to fill the gaps in their personal histories and seek answers to unanswered questions.

This chapter presents the diverse experiences of adult Korean adoptees who have been affected by original family search: those who have reunited, those who have not, and those representing the wide spectrum of experiences in between. Some adoptees make the conscious decision not to search for birth family while others spend months or even years seeking answers about their pasts. Although a protracted search can be emotionally draining and isolating, the vast majority of searches do not end in reunion. For the few who are reunited, the initial reunion marks the end of the search and the beginning of a new journey, including joys and frustrations, accomplishments and challenges. For families of origin, particularly original mothers, the

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<sup>106</sup> I use “birth family search” (BFS) when specifically referring to G.O.A.'L's services, a designation that the G.O.A.'L has chosen and employs. In all other cases, I use “original family search” in order to maintain consistency with my choice of “original” over “first” when referring to adoptees' Korean families.

reunion with the adoptee may signify a second chance, a long-awaited happening, or the opening of a traumatic past.

I begin by outlining the history of Korean-led post adoption services, ranging from programs established by the four remaining adoption agencies to the formation of Korea Adoption Services (KAS), formerly known as Korea Central Adoption Resources (KCARE). In order to understand the ways in which power and resistance interact at the site of original family search, I frame overseas Korean adoption as an industry that, in the past, has financially prospered off the separation of families. Through the lens of adoptees' experiences, I identify some of the challenges that hinder reunion, such as the debate between adoption agencies and adoptee organizations over adoption records ownership. From the perspective of the adoption agencies, the adoption files are their property, and they are protecting the confidentiality and best interests of the parents of origin by not disclosing identifying information to the adoptee. The agencies operate under the assumption that original parents do not desire to pursue a relationship with their now-adult child, demonstrated through the relinquishment of their child decades ago or by not initiating reunion themselves. Following this logic, they are often hesitant to pursue a search on behalf of the adoptee, particularly when the mother of origin was unwed. There is the risk the initial contact will disrupt the mother's present life and severely debilitate her current relationships with the secrets from her past.

Yet, the reunion and post reunion stories of adoptees and mothers of origin who were separated from their children decades ago challenge that assumption. Through their experiences, I elucidate how reunion has also served as a source for healing. Next, I focus on the ways adult adoptees and their allies have responded to power and practiced resistance against these systems. This includes an in-depth look at G.O.A'L's birth family search department, particularly its



annual First Trip Home program, as a creative form of resistance. Lastly, while studies on search typically focus on the “successful” reunion and post reunion stories between adoptees and their original families,<sup>107</sup> I will present scenarios in which adoptees have not been reunited with original family members. In what I consider the most ethnography-heavy chapter of my dissertation, I hope to stay close to the expressed words, hopes, and desires of these interlocutors while capturing the complexities and diversities involved in original family search.

### **Why or Why Not Search?**

Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, adult adoptees have been returning to their country of birth every year by the thousands. The motivations of adult adoptees to return to Korea are diverse, and not all desire to search for Korean family members. For example, American adoptee Jesse Knipling has been living in Korea for over two years, yet he made the decision not to initiate an original family search during his time there. Even though the majority of his adopted friends in Korea have conducted searches and/or experienced reunion, Knipling shared his reason for not pursuing a search:

There’s no hole in my psyche or consciousness for not knowing my birth parents. For my very scientific mind it’s like, congratulations, I share some genes or blood with these people! But seriously, other than for that chemical similarity, that’s all I share with them. The people who are my parents are the ones who took the time and love to raise me. Maybe my birth parents gave me up for good reasons, but I don’t feel like if I went out and searched that it would do anything for them.

While there is often an assumption among Koreans that adoptees hold a longing desire to be reunited with their original Korean families, Knipling, like many other adoptee returnees in

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<sup>107</sup> Elise Prébin, *Meeting Once More: The Korean Side of Transnational Adoption* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Sara Docan-Morgan, “Cultural Differences and Perceived Belonging During Korean Adoptees’ Reunions With Birth Families.” *Adoption Quarterly* 19, 2 (2016): 99-118.

Korea who do not pursue original family searches, poses a direct challenge to this assumption. As Hosu Kim argues in her study on search-and-reunion television shows, there lies an opportunity for reconciliation at the site of the adoptee/original family reunion.<sup>108</sup> Korean adoptees' search for their Korean families, particularly original mothers, and the eventual reunion are seen as reconciliations, "both as a personal trauma and as a collective cultural trauma."<sup>109</sup> This narrative lays the foundation for Korea, as a nation, to confront the traumatic history and losses involved in overseas adoption, thus initiating Korea's reconciliation with its past while also coinciding with its current global agenda.

By deconstructing this search-and-reunion narrative, nationally propagated through these popular Korean television shows, we can begin to see why there exists, among Koreans, an assumption that adult adoptees long for reunion. One Danish adoptee, who wishes to remain anonymous, spoke of his daily interactions with Korean taxi drivers and what typically unfolds the moment they learn he is not raised in Korea: "They usually ask me where I'm from, you know, because I have an accent when I speak Korean. I tell them I'm adopted, and then they usually ask, "Have you found your parents?" It's like they're shocked or disappointed or something when I tell them I don't want to look for them." In this situation, a certain dissonance emerges when the reunion narrative is applied to an adoptee who deliberately foregoes an original family search. For the Korean taxi drivers of whom my interviewee spoke, search and reunion facilitates the beginning of a healing and reconciliation process for individuals and the nation. An adoptee who does not wish to pursue reunion disrupts this adoption discourse that is embedded in the national imaginary.

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<sup>108</sup> Hosu Kim, "Television Mothers: Korean Birthmothers Lost and Found in the Search and Reunion Narratives," *Cultural Studies & Critical Methodologies* 12, no. 5 (2012): 438-449.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 440.

For those who make the decision to search for their families of origin, there are diverse reasons and motivations behind this decision. Some of my interview participants spoke of their desire to know their medical histories, as adoptees are provided with their own medical information in their adoption files but not that of their parents. While some adoptees expressed a desire to meet others who share similar physical attributes for the first time in their lives, there were a handful of other adoptees who confided in me that they only desired to meet their original parents one time. “I just want to meet once to tell them I’m happy and healthy,” one adopted interview participant told me.

For some of my interview participants, they were able to locate the exact moment in which they began to consider an original family search. In the summer of 2013, I interviewed Hana Crisp, a Korean adoptee who was raised in Australia and had reunited with her Korean family a few years prior through G.O.A.’L. I asked her at what moment in her life she began thinking about search and reunion, and she shared with me this memory:

I met a Korean Opera singer who was living in Australia, and she asked me where I was from in Korea. And I knew I was from Jeollabuk-do, but I realized I didn’t know anything about that. I didn’t even know if it was a city or a province, and I suddenly felt really embarrassed that the first three years of my life was completely unknown...I knew eventually someday I would have my own family, and I would want to know this stuff before starting my own family. Though I didn’t anticipate how much it would change my life. I didn’t do any real preparations. I was just like, why *not* search for my family? I was really naïve. (laughs)

There were also others who referred to a journey of adoptee identity exploration, with one of the phases taking the form of a search. Sona Renker, an American adoptee in her early forties with whom I held five one-hour long oral history interviews about the entire journey of her identity exploration as a Korean adoptee, offered insight into her own decision to search:

It was not necessarily that I wanted to find them, but I feel like that's the natural step in the adoptee coming out of the closet type thing. It's that you acknowledge adoption and the trauma and all of the stuff that comes with it, maybe figuring out the injustices. I mean different people come out of it in different ways, but for me, it was so eye opening. And then, I felt the next thing that people do is try to reclaim their birthright in some way, so it always, in some way, includes a search.

Similar to Renker's account involving her Korean adoptee identity exploration process, many of my other interview participants adoptees spoke of a journey of self-development that began during their college years, upon the birth of their children, or later in life. However, what I wish to avoid is normalizing a single identity journey or developmental trajectory for overseas Korean adoptees. All of the adoptees with whom I interacted represent diverse backgrounds and experiences, and arguably, their adoption overseas and return to Korea is the only point of commonality. Yet, for each of these adoptees, there was indeed a moment, if not a unique process, that influenced or culminated in their decision to pursue a search for their Korean families.

## **Post Adoption Service Organizations for Korean Adoptee Returnees**

### *Post Reunion Services of Adoption Agencies*

In order to assist the thousands of adult adoptees who returned to Korea in the late 1900s and early 2000s, different organizations and agencies established a number of post adoption services. Four of the original adoption agencies, Holt Children's Services, Social Welfare Society (SWS), Eastern Social Welfare Society (ESWS), and Korea Social Service (KSS),<sup>110</sup> established Post Adoption Services with the purpose of supporting adult adoptees with birth country visits and original family searches. Separate from the department that handles domestic

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<sup>110</sup> Korea Social Service, Inc. (KSS) no longer facilitates overseas and domestic adoptions. However, its doors have remained opened for the purpose of providing post adoption services to adult adoptees.

and overseas adoptions, the social workers in Post Adoption Services are responsible for handling all adoption case files, preparing file reviews for adoptees who wish to access their records, and performing searches on behalf of those who wish to pursue a search. However, due to inconsistent internal policies and limited staff, many adoptees have turned to alternative resources when pursuing searches.

### *Adoptee-Run Organizations*

While there are three adoptee-run organizations in Korea, Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (G.O.A.'L), Adoptee Solidarity Korea (ASK), and Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoptee Community Korea (TRACK), only G.O.A.'L, a service-based NGO that was established in January 1997 by a group of American and European adoptees, offers post adoption services to adoptee returnees. Led by an appointed Secretary General adoptee and a staff comprised of Korean adoptees and Korean nationals, this Seoul-based organization offers a number of services to adoptee returnees. These services include birth family searches and post-reunion services, assistance in acquiring F-4 visa and dual citizenship, language scholarships, translation services, community events and outreach, and more.

Since its founding, the core of G.O.A.'L's services offered to adoptees has been assistance with original family search. The G.O.A.'L Birth Family Search (BFS) Department is run by a BFS Director, a team of staff members, and a network of volunteer translators and interpreters. While anyone interested in receiving any of G.O.A.'L's diverse services must register and pay a membership fee of \$80 USD, the office strongly advocates for free assistance and support with regard to original family search for all Korean adoptees. This is a significant departure from a recent policy among several adoption agencies to charge Korean adoptees a fee

for assistance with original family search.<sup>111</sup> Even with cutback in government funding over the past five years and subsequent downsizing of its services, G.O.A.'L staff members understand the importance of assisting adoptees with birth family search. For this reason, G.O.A.'L has earned the reputation as the go-to organization for original family searches among adoptees living in Seoul.

### *Korean-Run Organizations*

International Korean Adoptee Service (InKAS) is a non-profit post-adoption organization founded in 1999 by Jung Aie-ree Jung, a Korean national whose parents dedicated their lives to running an orphanage. According to Jung, she once received a religious calling to assist adult adoptees and, despite her initial reservations, went on to establish this organization. INKAS provides services and assistance for adult Korean adoptees in the form of Korean language scholarships, private Korean language tutoring, motherland tours, interpretation services, long-term lodging in their guesthouse facility, among others. Run by Korean nationals, InKAS serves as a bridge between adult overseas adoptees and Korean society through a number of programs they have established. One such program is InKAS Language Bound, a social enterprise in which adult Korea adoptees teach English to Korean children from low-income families. The goal of this project is to offset Korea's education social imbalance by providing English lessons to children from impoverished backgrounds while creating jobs for adult Korean adoptees.

KoRoot (*ppuri ūi chip*) is a Korean-run organization for adoptees consisting of two parts: a guesthouse for adoptee returnees and their families who wish to stay in Seoul, and an NGO that engages in adoptee advocacy work. According to its website, the main mission of KoRoot NGO

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<sup>111</sup> Several adoptees with whom I spoke reported being quoted a travel fee when they inquired into an original family search. Holt International, for example, charges \$200 USD for a copy of an individual's adoption file and appointment to meet with a caseworker.

is to assist adoptees who return to Korea, contribute to the promotion of adoptees' human rights, and raise awareness of overseas adoption issues in Korean society. Serving hundreds of adult adoptees who pass through Seoul every year since 2002, KoRoot guesthouse operations are maintained by Pastor Do-hyun Kim, his wife, Korean staff members, Korean volunteers, and an adoptee staff member. The guesthouse supports the return and resettlement process of overseas adoptees in Korean society by not only providing temporary lodging, but also in finding work, translation and interpretation services, etc. Additionally, KoRoot informally offers original family search advice for those who request it. The NGO component of KoRoot frequently engages in solidarity activities alongside of TRACK, ASK, G.O.A.'L. and single mothers' organizations, having invited representatives from all three adoptee-run organizations to serve on its board.

Lastly, Nest Foundation (*tungji*), founded in 2007, is the most recently established Korean-run organization that provides support for adult adoptees who return to Korea. "*Tungji*," translating directly into "nest," reveals this organization's desire to "provide a warm nest with love to those who visit Korea." Nest provides pickup from the airport, places adoptees in homestays, offers guidance for adoptees who wish to conduct birth family searches, and reintroduces Korean culture to adoptee returnees. Additionally, this organization offers an annual tour for adult adoptees for the modest price of 300,000 *wŏn* (\$260 USD), designed so that participants can experience historical Korean landmarks, cuisine, and culture.

#### *Korea Adoption Services (KAS)*

In 2009, the Ministry of Health and Welfare created Korea Central Adoption Resources (KCARE) as a means to provide additional post adoption services for adoptee returns, and to

consolidate adoption-related activities in Korea. Three years later, the Korean government implemented the Special Adoption Act, turning the KCARE into the Korea Adoption Services (KAS). Along with its new designation, the mission of KAS was revised, and KAS was given a greater set of responsibilities as a government-affiliated organization. According to KAS's budget, in 2009, it received just under 1.9 billion *wŏn* (\$1.6 million USD) in funding from the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Funding was to be distributed among five areas: support for managing post adoption services, post adoption services, education and promotion for improving the recognition regarding domestic adoption, events on Adoption Day and Adoption Week, support for KAS. Additional funding was provided beginning in 2012 for preparations for the ratifying the Hague Convention. In 2013, KAS's total budget jumped to 6.15 billion *wŏn* (\$5.3 million USD). As indicated on its website, KAS aims to “systematize post-adoption services and encourage domestic adoption by building a cooperative system between government, adoption agencies, and relevant organizations, and establishing a centralized adoption database system.”<sup>112</sup> KAS would oversee all adoption-related activities and practices in Korea, and maintain a central database of adoptees' records. The implications of this stipulation were significant: the adoption agencies were now required to transfer all adoption records and original family search responsibilities to KAS.

### **Obstacles and Challenges of the Original Family Search Process**

For adult adoptees who decide to conduct an original family search, the process can be long, arduous, and filled with multiple obstacles. For all of my interviews with adoptee returnees, I asked the same question: What is the most pressing issue for adult adoptees in Korea? Of those

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<sup>112</sup> On-Han Shin, “History of Korean adoption during 50 years,” Korea Adoption Services, <http://www.kcare.or.kr/en/intro/opening.jsp>.



who personally experienced or were aware of the original family search process, the majority voiced their frustrations over the inaccessibility to adoption files or inadequate support for original family search. Their frustrations are reflected in the percentage of “successful” searches among adoptees; adoptee activists, G.O.A.’L staff members, and Korean adoption scholars estimate the success rate of original family searches to be anywhere from 2 to 15%.<sup>113</sup> Yet, there is no precise data on the total number of searches that have taken place. This can be attributed to the disjointed efforts of multiple organizations and agencies that conduct searches, independent searches conducted by individuals, and the lack of one agency that collects and records statistics on searches. In order to understand why a greater percentage of adoptees and original families have not been reunited, we must take a closer look at the original family search process and the role of KAS.

### *The Limitations of KAS and the Unaccountability of Adoption Agencies*

Despite law revisions and a large budget, KAS has struggled to reunite adoptees and original family members due to its inexperience with original family search, a shortage of trained staff, and a lack of accountability in upholding Special Adoption Law revisions. Even with its 1.467 billion *wŏn* (roughly \$1.26 million USD) allocated to post adoption services alone, KAS, as of 2013, had a 0% success rate of adoptee/original family reunions. In late 2013, when I interviewed Sara Yun a KAS post-adoption services social worker, she described some of challenges that she and her staff have encountered. According to Yun, KAS must first request an adoption file from the adoption agency through which the adoptee was adopted in order to initiate a search. One issue is that two of the agencies refused to hand over physical copies of the

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<sup>113</sup> Paul Y. Chang and Andrea Kim Cavicchi, “Claiming Rights: Organizational and Discursive Strategies of the Korean Adoptee and Unwed Mothers Movement.” *Korea Observer*, Volume 46(1): 187-244

file, instead opting to create their own forms and fill in limited information from the original files. Yun spoke of the “controversies” between KAS and the adoption agencies, sharing one example of how adoption agencies believe it is their responsibility to initially reach the original parents. “It’s like, KAS is a new organization, the organization that the birth family doesn’t know about. And then if we contact them and ask, “Do you know this adoptee,?” the agencies think [the birth families] are going to freak out.” Now by law, Yun emphasized, KAS is responsible for conducting original family searches. Yet, there is no article within Special Adoption Law that holds the adoption agencies accountable for failing to cooperate with KAS. In Yun’s own words, “[The adoption agencies] know that what they should do, you know, but there’s no reason for them to comply.”

### *On Being Denied Access to Adoption Records*

Everyone is entitled to know where they came from, everyone is entitled to know their origins story. What we are asking for is what is my birthdate, where was I born, who were the parents that I had, who abandoned me. These files, this is your life, its not just, oh I feel like I want to learn who my parents are. This is your life, and you have a right to access records to your life.

—Kim Stoker, adoptee raised in the U.S. (Interview 2014)

[People] talk about the records as if they are the property of the agency, but you know what, that’s what they treat it as, but it’s ours. They have our stuff. Koreans need to view [the issue of giving adoptees their files] not as “we are doing charity for these adoptees,” but as a civil rights issue. Why is it that my information is kept secret from me? The only other people whose identities are a secret are people in a witness protection program.

—Jane Jeong Trenka, adoptee raised in the U.S. (Interview 2014)

The main issue comes down to access to adoption records. As the two aforesaid quotations indicate, during the original family search process, adoption agencies have often treated adoption files as their property to which adult adoptees are not entitled. At the time of the adoption, a file is created for each child, including basic information of the child’s identity, detailed health records, a brief description of the circumstances surrounding the relinquishment or abandonment, a photo, and an orphan registry. In order to expedite an adoption, a child must

become a “legal orphan” or “paper orphan” through the creation of an orphan registry even in the circumstances that both parents are living. An orphan *hojŏk* (family registry) is created, thereby configuring the legal status of the child as adoptable. In circumstances in which a Korean relative relinquishes a child to the agency, an intake form is filled out and included in the adoption file. While inconsistent across records, this form typically contains the parent’s name, hometown, and age at the time of relinquishment, and in some cases, additional information such as the parent’s resident registration number (*chumintŭngnokpŏnho*), current address, and telephone number. For adoptees who pursue reunion, access to this form not only fills in critical gaps in their family histories, but serves as one of the only ways adoptees can achieve reunion. In recent years, however, this is the form from which adoptees are blocked from accessing.

This was the experience of Tammy Perillo, one of the many adoptees who has been denied access to her full adoption file. Perillo initiated her search in Fall of 2013 by requesting her adoption file from Holt International, an entity based in Eugene, Oregon, operated separately from, though working in partnership with Holt Korea. She received her U.S. adoption file from Holt International, and to her surprise, was sent her Korean adoption file from Holt Korea months later. For Perillo, this was the first time she learned information about her original family information existed. She was told by a Holt social worker that a search was possible though difficult due to the incompatibility of her mother’s old registration number with the new registration system. Learning that her father had passed away prior to her relinquishment decades ago, Perillo requested his full name be released. From that point, Holt Korea informed Perillo they would be working with KAS on her case. In May of 2014, however, KAS informed Perillo that they were unable to locate the current whereabouts of her Korean mother. They reached out

to Keon-su Lee,<sup>114</sup> a sergeant at Namyang Police Station unaffiliated with KAS or the agencies, who has been independently assisting adoptees with their searches since February 2002. Ultimately, the search produced no results, and Perillo was also told by KAS and Holt Korea that, by law, neither would be able to release her father's name nor provide a copy of her adoption file. She received the following from KAS:

I still can't disclose the identifying information of your birth parents. Although your birth parents cannot be located, the information is left in your adoption document as their personal identifying information. In addition, according to the law, the identifying information of birth parents can be disclosed without their consent, only when the adoptees have a very life threatening medical problem.

Perillo reach out to Holt again in 2015, requesting Holt attempt to contact her Korean mother through the provided address in her adoption file. While Perillo was not allowed to see the file containing the address herself, Holt complied with her request and sent a telegram<sup>115</sup> to the listed address. No response was received. At the moment, Perillo's search remains in limbo, as neither Holt nor KAS has proceeded with her case, and Perillo has returned to the United States.

### *Multiple Interpretations of Special Adoption Law Revisions*

The law cited by KAS refers to a specific revision to Special Adoption Law, passed by the Korean National Assembly on June 29, 2011 and taking effect a year later. KAS and the

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<sup>114</sup> Keon-su Lee currently works at a center for locating lost children in the police department. Lee reunited 3,742 people between 2002 and 2012 by applying genetic testing, sending out thousands of personal letters to potential relatives, and through a number of other methods. He currently holds the world record for the number of facilitated reunions. His name is frequently circulated among adoptees pursuing original family searches, and many turn to him for assistance when they reach a dead end with KAS or their adoption agency.

<sup>115</sup> The "telegram" system in Korea is an electronic letter service, typed into a website form, then depending on which company is used, phone company or post office, is printed out at the closest office to the delivery address. It is then delivered by an employee or the mailman usually within 1-2 days of being sent, requiring a signature from the intended recipient.

adoption agencies have pointed to this revision as the reason why they, by law, cannot disclose the identifying information of original family members. Paradoxically, it was a coalition of adult adoptees who drafted and submitted this revision to the National Assembly in order for adoptees to obtain the greater access to their adoption files. The Special Adoption Law revision in question is the following:

Figure 3.1: *Special Adoption Law (2012)*

<b>Chapter 5: Disclosure of information on adopted children, etc.</b>	
<b>Article 36 (Disclosure, etc. of adoption information)</b>	
36.1	A person who is adopted under this Act may request the release of their adoption records held by the KAS or adoption agencies. In case a request for information disclosure is made by a minor adoptee, his or her birth parents' prior consent shall be obtained.
36.2	In case a request for disclosure of adoption records is made pursuant to the above paragraph, the KAS president or the head of the adoption agency shall disclose the requested information with the consent of the birth parents of the child concerned. Notwithstanding the foregoing, in case the birth parents of the child concerned do not consent to such disclosure, the requested information, excluding their identifying information, shall be disclosed.
36.3	Despite the foregoing, information may be disclosed if a special reason such as a medical problem, etc. requires so though the birth parents are not able to express their consent because of their being deceased or for other reasons.
36.4	The scope of information disclosure set forth in the above three paragraphs, application process for such information disclosure and other necessary matters shall be determined by the Presidential Decree.

Source: Ministry of Health and Welfare (2012)

Jane Jeong Trenka, one of the adult adoptee activists who drafted this article, explained that the original intention behind drafting this revision was to *increase* adoptees' access to their adoption files, thereby facilitating more reunions. Referring to 36.3, Trenka said that the goal was to create a revision that required adoption agencies and KAS to release all identifying information of the original parents if the adoptee had a medical condition *or* in the case a parent or both

parents were deceased. However, the meaning was lost in the English-Korean-English translation, and the revision has been interpreted so that *only* in the case both parents are deceased *and* the adoptee has a serious medical condition, KAS and the adoption agencies are required to disclose the parent's identifying information to the adoptee.

As I met regularly with this coalition of adult adoptees who had worked on the original revisions and are currently working on remodifying these revisions, I learned much about the dynamics between adoption agencies and adoptees who search. One recurring issue was the hesitance of social workers to initiate contact with original mothers who were unwed at the time of the adoption. There are a number of possible factors that explain the relative ease of some reunions versus others, one of which being an unofficial, unenforced search guideline to which the four adoption agencies have inconsistently adhered. According to a copy of this manual—a manual that is kept private among adoption agency social workers but I was able to view by chance—specifies the following: If the relinquishing parents were married at the time of the adoption, the parents can be contacted directly if identifying information is available. If the relinquishing parent was an unwed mother at the time of adoption, the mother should not be contacted directly; instead, those within her vicinity should be contacted first (*loose translation*). What this reveals is how adoption agency social workers proceed with each original family search based on the marital status of the parents at the time of adoption. According to one Holt social worker with whom I spoke on this topic, if the social worker was to hand over the full adoption file to the adoptee and this adoptee was to make unannounced contact with the original mother, there is a great chance the mother's current life will be disrupted. The blame will then be placed on the adoption agency who ensured her privacy at the time of relinquishment. The dispute between adult adoptees and adoption agencies over file access exposes a larger debate:

an adoptee's right to know versus an original parent's right to privacy. Are the two mutually exclusive, or is it possible to honor the confidentiality of the original parents while also providing the adoptee with the personal and medical history records?

John Compton, an American adoptee who holds dual citizenship and is actively involved in adoptee rights advocacy work in Seoul, put it simply:

Adoption agencies operate under the assumption that our mothers don't want to meet us. If the agency sends out a telegram and there isn't any reply, they automatically assume the birth mother doesn't want to meet the adoptee. They need to start doing searches under the assumption that our mothers want to be in reunion.

As demonstrated in the cases of hundreds of adoptees, not only are social workers hesitant to make contact with mothers of origin who were unwed at the time of relinquishment, but they also discontinue a search if they receive no response to their sent telegram or letter. It is assumed that the parent or parents received the message, and the non-response is interpreted as a rejection to reunite. However, what Compton urges KAS and the adoption agencies is to pursue a search on behalf of the adoptee only up until the parent responds and explicitly refuses reunion. The addresses to which these telegrams and letters are sent are often the original addresses listed in the adoption files from previous decades ago. There is the possibility the parent has since moved to a different location, the address in the file is incorrect, or someone other than the parent intercepted the telegram. Currently, this coalition, include Trenka and Compton, are working toward submitting additional revisions in order to streamline the search process and increase adoptees' access to their files.

### *Misinformation in Adoption Files*

Another obstacle that adoptees identify as impeding reunion is the resistance of adoption agencies to reunite adoptees with their original families. Hope Huynh, an adoptee who was raised in the United States and has been searching for her original family since 2001, shared with me, “I think the agencies don’t want to help adoptees reunite because they know they messed up or manipulated our adoption files. They’ll get in trouble if we reunite and the real truth comes out.” What Huynh is referring to is the practice of altering adoption records for the purpose of making a child more “adoptable.” In Huynh’s case, she suspects the information in her adoption file was tweaked in order to conceal a baby trafficking operation. When Huynh first accessed her file at Social Welfare Services (SWS) in 2001, her search appeared to be simple and straightforward. The woman listed as her original mother was deceased, prompting the social worker at SWS to contact Huynh’s mother’s twin sister who was still alive. When Huynh pursued a DNA test to confirm the relationship, however, the results yielded a less than .001% chance of relation. This marked the beginning of Huynh’s 15+ year search, which she is still conducting today.

As her social worker dug deeper into her file, it was discovered that she was one of the thirteen children who had been brought to SWS by an unidentified man in 1979. According to the file, this man claimed to have found thirteen children on a U.S. military base, and was then personally responsible for handling their adoptions to the U.S. with the assistance of SWS. Since 2001, Huynh has appeared on numerous search-and-reunion shows, spent over \$5000 in DNA testing, and has been struggling with her U.S.-based adoption agency for a copy of her adoption file. She was told that her adoption file in the U.S. contains the identifying information of four different children, none of whose identities Huynh can confirm as her own. It has been over fifteen years since she began her search, and it has been fourteen years since she learned she lost



her “paper identity,” as she put it. “I thought I was Sung Eun Kyung. I had a name, birthdate, hometown, and a mother. But I have nothing now, and I don't know where to search because I have no information anymore. I just want to know who I am.”

While there is no substantial proof that the information in Huynh’s file was deliberately modified, that was not the case for Freeman. Freeman returned to Korea for the first time in 2013 through First Trip Home, when she requested a file review with a social worker at Eastern Social Welfare Society (ESWS), the adoption agency through which she was adopted to Australia at four months old. According to the official adoption records, Freeman had been born to and relinquished by an unwed mother who left no identifying information. Yet when her social worker reached the end of her file, they both discovered a piece of paper in the back separate from her official adoption records. On this page listed the names, ages, hometowns, and histories of both of her parents. They were married at the time, struggled financially, and already having four daughters, decided to relinquish Freeman to adoption. In Freeman’s words, her social worker told her the following upon her questioning of the discrepancy of information:

According to Australian law, I wouldn’t have been allowed to be adopted there if they knew my parents were married, or something like that? I can’t remember if she said it was the Australian government or Korean government. But basically, if they knew my parents were married, I wouldn’t have been able to be adopted...I was surprised that this happened to nearly everyone on [G.O.A.’L’s 2013 First Trip Home] who found their families. They all had fake files or the wrong information. We all found out new things, and I was really shocked by that.

A few days later, Freeman was reunited with her Korean mother and father, who were still married, and four older sisters. She returned to Australia at the end of the trip and made the decision to return for a year to live in Korea where she would work on growing a relationship with her Korean family members.

## **Reunion and Post Reunion**

Freeman's reunion story is just one of many. Hana Crisp's reunion and post reunion story reflects the ambivalences that, for many adoptees, emerge after and even during the initial reunion. Hana was reunited through G.O.A.'L's First Trip Home program in 2010, describing parts of the reunion as "somehow disappointing" and "sobering." Similar to the accounts of other adoptees who described the initial reunion, Hana spoke of a fantasy that her Korean parents would be "mysterious, even extraordinary, people," and she would be able to recognize her own face in theirs immediately. However, her experience was far from what she envisioned:

It was overwhelming the first day I met them, a blur, and I wasn't at all present. I met my grandmother first. She hugged me and was sobbing. And then my mother came in and did the same thing. I don't know if I somehow disconnected myself from feeling things, but I didn't feel emotional. And I couldn't understand them without the interpreter. I was just happy that I found them and was trying to comfort them, and I didn't know what to say. I was kind of disappointed that they could have been anyone. It could have literally been any Korean woman. Now I feel the resemblance if I look at photos of us together, but then, I didn't see anything.

The initial shock of the reunion eventually wore off during what Crisp refers to as the "honeymoon" period, and she was able to experience "the bittersweet feelings of loss and gain" as she reconnected with her family. During one family gathering when an interpreter was present, Crisp learned that she had lived with her maternal grandmother until nearly the age of three, as her mother was unable to care for her at the time. Her uncle recalled that on the day her great uncle brought her to the adoption agency to relinquish her, she had begged her family, "Aunties, uncles, please don't let me go! Don't leave me here, I'll be a good girl." Hearing her uncle's story and witnessing the relatively comfortable lifestyle of her family made Crisp question how they could have relinquished her in the first place. Residing in Australia, she makes frequent trips back to Korea to visit her family of origin, though she admits the relationship has not become suddenly easier. A more recent example was when Crisp's Korean aunt and uncle were

married and did not extend a wedding invitation, leading Crisp to believe they were ashamed of her as an adoptee, which was “a representation of me not being part of the family.” Even though Crisp shared stories of disappointment and doubt, she also expressed that reunion has included many rich, rewarding, and healing moments as well.

Other adoptees in reunion described their post reunion experiences quite differently. Tae-in Egbert, adopted to the U.S. at age four, shared with me one of his earliest memories of finding himself lost on a dirt road and not knowing how to get home. When the police found him, he could not explain directions to his house, was taken to the police station, and then brought to an orphanage within the same day. He was eventually transferred to a foster home and adopted overseas soon after that. Reunited in 2006 with his mother, who was an unwed mother, and his father, who had a poor relationship with his mother, Egbert has a fond memory of the initial reunion:

So that same day, we drove down to Daegu to meet my father’s side. It was really cool, they were really nice to me, and their goal was to drink with me. (laughs) My aunts just wanted to hold my hand and hug me, my mom wouldn’t leave me side. That night was really, really nice actually.

While only in Korea temporarily for the purpose of reunion, Egbert returned to the U.S. and soon decided to move to Korea where he lived for three years. With the unexpected suicide of his father, Egbert described his current relationship with his mother:

Currently, it’s a nice relationship, though the language barrier, of course, prevents it from going any further. I am the only son, and my mother has certain expectations of me. That’s something I’m very nervous about because of our different cultures. And even the family will say, oh, you’ll take care of her when she’s older. It makes me feel awkward, and I try to laugh about it and push it away. So we’ll see.

From Egbert’s perspective, as the only son in the family, his reunion was accompanied with a new set of expectations and responsibilities placed upon him. While this may be the case, there

are also a number of misunderstandings that arise between adoptees and their Korean families in post reunion. In the summer of 2011, I had the opportunity to teach English in Seoul to a group of original mothers, all of whom had been reunited with their adult adopted children in recent years. While their stories of separation and reunion were vastly different, the common experience of reunion was what brought them together. What I originally was told would be a beginner-level English class transformed into a question and answer period—one in which I, an adoptee who had experienced reunion and was able to verbally communicate with them in the Korean language, was asked to explain a number of issues troubling these mothers.

Sonya,<sup>116</sup> the leader and *onni* (elder sister) of the group, met her American son once in Japan for three days while he was on a homestay. Holly met her daughter, who had been adopted to France as an infant, about four times since their initial reunion. As an unwed mother, Esther relinquished her son to adoption when he was just an infant. They maintained a relationship after reunion during the year he lived in Korea, though he ended contact with his mother the day he moved back to the U.S. Lastly, Sally, the most talkative of the group, relinquished her twin daughters at birth, both of whom were adopted together to the U.S. Years later, she had two sons whom she raised, and one of them was currently studying English and living with her daughter in the U.S. While they spoke of the challenges involved during post reunion, all four of them articulated in one way or another that reunion represented a second chance, a new beginning. “I never forgave myself,” Holly shared as tears filled her eyes, “But then I was given a second chance to be a mom. I really want to be a good mother.” Though for the mothers, it was the language barrier that produced the most misunderstandings, leading to feelings of sadness and frustration. “I want to speak sincerely (*chinsimŭro*) to my son and tell him my exact thoughts,

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<sup>116</sup> Each mother assigned herself an English name the first day of class, though I have given pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of these mothers.

but I feel frustrated because I can't." Sally recounted a time when her daughter conveyed sadness during a family gathering with other original family members, something that Sally could not understand. Esther had friended her son on Facebook as a way to maintain communication with him upon his return to the United States. She was hurt and confused as to why he did not respond to her messages, jumping to the conclusion that he did not want to betray his adoptive mother by maintaining a relationship with his original one.

Despite the frequent miscommunications and frustrations for both sides of the reunited, all four of the mothers expressed how grateful they were to be granted the opportunity to meet their children later in life. These articulations directly challenge the assumption that mothers, who were unwed at the time of relinquishment, do not desire reunion. Three of the four mothers were unwed at the time they bore their children, and all three approached reunion as a second chance to mother the children they were not able to raise. Indeed, there are mothers of origin and other original family members who reject reuniting with their adult children. However, as is the case for these unwed mothers, maintaining privacy and protecting their identities from their adult children who sought reunion was never an issue.

### **G.O.A.'L's First Trip Home (FTH) Program**

#### *Resistance Against Separation*

As mentioned previously, Freeman was not the only one during the First Trip Home program who discovered her original adoption records had been altered. This section shifts the focus to G.O.A.'L's 2013 First Trip Home, highlighting additional challenges program participants in their quest for answers and reunion. As an alternative to the original family search programs of KAS and adoption agencies, G.O.A.L's First Trip Home program demonstrates a

creative form of resistance against power—power, in this instance, exhibiting itself as the forces that have led to and maintain the separation of adoptees and original family members. In the past, adoption, situated in humanitarian discourse and determined as representing the best interests of the child, has been used as a cost-saving alternative to supporting an effective social welfare system. These separations have been converted into financial gains by adoption agencies and the Korean government, creating a multi-billion dollar industry.<sup>117</sup> According to Holt International’s current website, the estimated total cost of adopting a child from Korea ranges from \$36,755 to \$45,650.<sup>118</sup> This total is broken down into the following:

Figure 3.2: *Holt International Adoption Fees*

Holt fees	\$32,500 - \$32,900
Third party costs	\$1,805 - \$6,250
Travel costs	\$2,450 - \$6,500
<b>Estimated total</b>	<b>\$36,755 - \$45,650</b>

Source: Holt International, Inc. (2016)

Reversing the separations that adoption agencies and the government created decades ago, in many ways, is counterintuitive to the adoption model itself. As Danish adoptee Jes Eriksen explained, in monetary terms, it is not practical for either the government nor adoption agencies to invest in original family searches on behalf of adult adoptees:

These agencies, never in their wildest dreams did they think we would come back. And really, no one has any incentive to throw money at this problem [of poor original family search services]. The government hopes we just go away silently, and if they keep it at this current level, actually, we will just die out.

By seeking to reunite with their original family members, adoptees respond and resist against the

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<sup>117</sup> Kathryn Joyce, *The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking, and the New Gospel of Adoption* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013): xv.

<sup>118</sup> “Adoption Fees,” Holt International, 2016, <http://www.holtinternational.org/adoption/fees.php>.

systems of power that have created and maintained their separation. Adoptees face multiple challenges during the original family search, including difficulties in accessing complete adoption records and the hesitance or refusal of adoption agency social workers to facilitate reunions. Yet, programs such as G.O.A.'L's First Trip Home have utilized creative and innovative methods in order to reestablish the physical and emotional ties between adoptees and their families of origin. In the areas where the post adoption services of adoption agencies and KAS have proved insufficient, G.O.A.'L has taken up the proverbial torch to help adoptees fill the gaps in their personal histories and seek answers to unanswered questions.

FTH tour distinguishes itself from other motherland tours in two key ways: the main component of this program is original family search, and it is run mainly by adoptees who have experienced the original family search process firsthand. Since its inception in 2008, FTH has assisted 145 adoptees with their original family searches, seventy of whom have been reunited with their Korean families. During the 2013 trip, an astonishing eight of the eighteen participants (44.4%) were successfully able to locate and reunite with original family members, a rate particularly extraordinary when taking into consideration the estimated 2 to 15% reunion success rate. While a heavily funded, government-run organization, such as KAS, struggles to facilitate even a handful of adoptee/original family reunions per year, how is G.O.A.'L's First Trip Home program able to facilitate a great number of reunions, notwithstanding its constant struggle for adequate funding and limited manpower?

### *Alternative and Unconventional Methods of Search*

Original family search is a topic that arises at some point for many adult adoptee returnees in Korea, and, in some cases, is the primary motivation for return. This is the case for

all of the adoptees who participate in G.O.A.'L's First Trip Home (FTH) program, an eleven day annual tour funded by the Korean government and fully organized and run by G.O.A.'L staff and volunteers. FTH is usually held in



Image 3.1: Welcome banner on the first day of G.O.A.'L's First Trip Home (2013)

the late summer or early fall and lasts roughly a week and a half. Similar to most motherland tours, there is a sightseeing component built into this program. However, participants are encouraged to stay in Korea after the conclusion of FTH for additional sightseeing, as the packed itinerary leaves little room for free, individual time. In order to be selected as a FTH participant, applicants must be eighteen years or older and should not have previously returned to Korea since the applicant's adoption overseas. The purpose of the latter requirement is to provide an opportunity for adoptees who may otherwise lack the resources or network in Korea.

### *2013 First Trip Home*

I reached out to G.O.A.'L in the summer of 2013 to voice my interest in participating in First Trip Home as a researcher. On previous trips to Korea, I had participated in various events held by G.O.A.L as an adult adoptee and established a rapport with staff members. They warmly welcomed me to participate on this trip, and it was determined that I would assume the role as staff volunteer and academic researcher. G.O.A.'L's First Trip Home team was comprised of the following: three adoptees (one American male, one American female, one Danish male) who had been permanently residing in Korea for multiple years and were consistently active with G.O.A.'L; three adoptees (one American male, one Danish female, one French female) and the



adult son of a Korean American adoptee who were working in G.O.A.'L's Mentor Program<sup>119</sup>; three Korean females who worked with G.O.A.'L in some capacity since its early stages; and three Korean female university students who were hired as part-time G.O.A.'L volunteers and provided with small stipends. Four of the six adoptees had pursued original family searches themselves, and more than half of the team had participated on previous First Trip Home tours and were able to share their experiences and knowledge with the newer staff members. I had personal experiences with original family search and reunion, though this was my first involvement with the First Trip Home program.

I attended organizational meetings leading up to the commencement of the tour and assisted in organizing logistics of the tour. Since roughly half of the 2013 FTH participants were born and/or adopted from the southern region of Korea, the team decided to base part of the tour in Busan, a large port city in Korea located 325 kilometers southeast of Seoul. Two weeks prior to the FTH trip, two FTH team members and I were sent from Seoul to Busan to interview and train local volunteers who voiced interest in providing assistance during our Busan stay. The majority of volunteers were university students in Busan who learned about this opportunity from posts G.O.A.'L had made on universities' online volunteer boards. All except one had never met an overseas adoptee before. While securing a sufficient number of volunteers in Busan was important, a more important task before the participants arrived was to carefully comb through all the adoption files in order to strategize effective birth family searches for every one of the participants. Each adoptee's file told a unique story leading up to their adoption, and the searches would be customized based on the information in the adoption files and whatever

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<sup>119</sup> Since 2006, G.O.A.'L has invited Korean adoptees to apply to its Mentor Program, a one year opportunity for adoptees to taken an active role in day-to-day work as well as long-term projects of the organization. For twenty hours a week and a monthly stipend of 560,000 KRW (approximately 500 USD), mentors assist and support the various departments of G.O.A.'L including original family search assistance, F-4 visa and Dual Citizenship assistance, event coordination, etc.

additional information we could collect. The following provides the adoption backgrounds and basic information of the eighteen participants:

Figure 3.3: *Backgrounds of 2013 First Trip Home Participants*

	<b>Country of Adoption</b>	<b>Adoption Agency</b>	<b>Year of Birth</b>	<b>Gender</b>
1	Australia	ESWS	1985	F
2	Australia	ESWS	1988	F
3	Denmark	Holt	1974	F
4	Denmark	Holt	1984	M
5	Denmark	KSS	1994	F
6	Netherlands	KSS	1970	F
7	Norway	Holt	1971	F
8	Sweden	SWS	1971	F
9	Sweden	SWS	1980	F
10	United States	Holt	1972	F
11	United States	Holt	1973	F
12	United States	ESWS	1975	F
13	United States	ESWS	1975	M
14	United States	SWS	1975	F
15	United States	Holt	1982	F
16	United States	ESWS	1984	F
17	United States	Holt	1984	M
18	United States	KSS	N/A	F

As the chart indicates, FTH participants represented six different countries and all four adoption agencies; fifteen were females, three males, and the average age was 33.4 years old, with an age range from eighteen to forty-three years. Prior to the arrival of participants, FTH staff coordinated with the adoption agencies, requesting that letters be sent and phone calls be made on behalf of the adoptees whose files contained the identifying information of Korean family members. Through these efforts, the original parents of three participants were successfully located before the program even commenced.

G.O.A.'L's office was essentially shut down during the duration of this program, as manpower was short, and everyone felt it necessary to invest every effort into reuniting

participants with their Korean families. The structure of that year's program was organized and run by a staff that included several overseas Korean adoptees who reside in Korea and had experienced original family search firsthand. Staff members, adopted and non-adopted alike, were trained to be aware of and sensitive to the emotional journey that participants experience during the original family search process. As multiple First Trip Home participants shared with me during interviews, this grassroots approach stands in contrast to the approach of tours organized by adoption agencies or Korean-run organizations. Anders Nielsen, a FTH participant from Denmark, emphasized how important it was to participate on a trip run by Korean adoptees as opposed to his adoption agency: "Most of the volunteers were adopted and did birth searches themselves, so they know what they're talking about. They know how it feels, and they don't see it as a business." When I asked him to elaborate upon his business comment, he explained that some adoption agencies, including his own, treat original family search assistance as a business transaction in which they can make a monetary profit. His adoption agency in Denmark charged him 1000 Danish Krone (\$150 USD) just to access his adoption records. The rapport that is established between the G.O.A'L staff and its participants is one of the characteristics that distinguishes it from other motherland tours.

#### *Innovative and Creative Search Methods of FTH*

One of the veteran First Trip Home staff workers stated that an adoption file may appear to hold no useful information, such as the files of those adoptees who had been anonymously abandoned. However, even the most minute detail may lead to a smaller clue, which may then lead to a larger clue, which, then in turn, may lead to an address of a family member. A few of the participants' files contained partial identifying information of family members and their exact

birth location, while others had nothing except the place where they were found abandoned and their subsequent orphanage records. One of the main obstacles we faced was trying to locate buildings, such as clinics or recorded sites of abandonment, which had closed years before without leaving any record trails. Many had also moved locations or had changed the names of their establishments, contributing to the frustration of figuring out how to proceed with this dead-end. Adding to these complications was the fact that the Korean address system had changed.

The way we approached abandonment cases was to, first, see if the file contained any information related to the abandonment: place of abandonment, date of abandonment, individual who found and reported the abandoned child, police report documenting abandonment, and police officer who created document. Anders Nielsen's search is an example of such a case. In Nielsen's file, the only information he had regarding his abandonment was the name of an inn in Busan where he had been found. The next step was determining if this inn still existed, and then locating the current address. Due to poor record keeping, an unenforced address system in the past, and multiple changes in address systems, tracing older addresses from the 1980s and early proved challenging. Some of the local offices maintained older records, so the new address could easily be determined. However, the maintenance of this information is not consistent across regions, and it was also not uncommon for residents to list an incorrect address as their own.

Fortunately for Nielsen, the local city hall had maintained old address records and was able to provide an updated address. Accompanied by a Korean volunteer, Nielsen visited the new address, only to discover it had closed down years ago. The next step was to somehow locate the owner of the inn. As the Korean volunteer interpreted, Nielsen spent the afternoon speaking with local shop owners and residents who worked and lived in the vicinity of where this inn was once located. By chance, they met a man who knew the woman whose parents owned this inn decades

ago. With the assistance of the local police, Nielsen was remarkably able to track down this woman by telephone. The woman, now in her fifties, said she distinctly remembered Nielsen and the day he was left at her family’s inn. “She was crying the whole time that Juyeon (G.O.A.’L staff member) was talking to her on the phone,” Nielsen reflected, “She said she really cared about me.” Diverging from the story in his file that cited anonymous abandonment, this woman recounted how it was Nielsen’s maternal grandmother who initially brought him into the inn. She asked this girl’s parents to watch over her grandson for a short period of time, as she need to go out and take care of a personal matter. By the end of the day, however, Nielsen’s grandmother never returned, and the owners of the inn, along with their teenage daughter, fostered Nielsen for four months before bringing him to an orphanage. Nielsen’s search did not yield a reunion during the First Trip Home program, however, he is hopeful that he may someday discover more answers to his questions.

Some of the search methods in which G.O.A.’L engaged were none that I would ever would have contrived on my own. The G.O.A.’L staff members who had experience in original family searches have been employing these methods from the day G.O.A.’L’s Birth Family Search Department was established. As one longtime G.O.A.’L staff member explained to me, “You just have to be really creative and go out there and do the work. You really have to be willing to try anything because you never know what might turn up.” On the days in which original family search was the focus, the staff and I stayed up until three or even four o’clock in the morning, reanalyzing the files, following up on leads,



Image 3.2: A search flyer that was created and posted in multiple locations in adoptee’s hometown (2013)

researching locations online, creating individualized flyers for each participant that would be posted throughout their hometowns, among other search tactics. Nearly everyday, an impromptu plan was carried out, whether that involved accompanying an adoptee on a four-hour train ride to a newly discovered address that may lead to something greater, or knocking on the doors of local homes inquiring about an individual. We visited local hairdresser shops (*miyongsil*) and senior citizen centers (*noinjǒng*), striking up conversations with the owners and patrons to see if they could offer us any leads. We placed search ads in local newspapers, contacted reporters to request they cover an adoptee's search story, thereby drawing public attention to the search. We reached out to local television programs and were able to secure airtime for a handful of the participants. On this nationally televised program, they shared their stories, photos, and whatever information they had in the hope that a relative was watching.

While it is illegal in Korea to conduct a person search without proof of relation, many of our participants formed an immediate rapport with local police officers in their hometowns. Upon listening to the search stories of the adoptees, police chiefs often turned a blind eye to the illegal searches being conducted in their stations. Through a Korean interpreter, Jinsook Boer, for example, shared her adoption story with police officers at a local police station in her hometown. Immediately fascinated by her story, they accompanied Boer to the exact location listed in her adoption file, an apartment building that, unfortunately, had been torn down a decade ago. Boer recalled the following:

Being at that spot was very powerful but also very surreal because the place where I lived, it was not there anymore. It was just a location. And to walk around and knock on doors and to ask people, do you know, do you remember? Nobody remembered. It was very strange but very powerful to be there.

In the end, Boer's search was unsuccessful. Yet, the compassion and generosity that these police officers demonstrated, according to Boer, was more than she could have ever asked for.

*Reunion for Some, A Continued Search for Others*

By the end of the trip, eight of the eighteen participants had reunited with original family members. While three of these reunions had been coordinated prior to the start of the trip, an



Image 3.3: First Trip Home participants, G.O.A.'L staff, and volunteers (2013)

astonishing five were reunited during the program, credited mainly to the creative and painstaking efforts of the G.O.A.'L First Trip Home staff. It is an understatement to say that for those whose searches did not end successfully were disappointed. Jenny Jendro, an American adoptee whose search did not result in reunion conveyed to me, “Telling myself to not have any expectations is really just

a way to hold onto the fantasy that keeps me protected...protected from the fact that I might never get answers to these questions that are really, really essential and important to who we are as human beings.” Five of the ten participants whose searches did not result in reunion returned to Korea within the next year to continue searching and re-experience the place with which they so intimately connected in just those eleven days. During one of the post-trip interviews I held with one of the participants, she expressed to me, “I didn’t find my family, but I accomplished more than I could ever have imagined. I learned about my life and myself in Korea, and I made friendships for life.”

## Conclusion

Before anything else happens, we need access to our files. For one, the files document our births and where we were in that moment. It is fundamentally human to be born; we are born and we die. And for adoptees who are not yet dead, that one piece that connects us to this theme of humanity is missing for us. So in every moment, we have to negotiate our humanity because we don't have that core of our birth records...and for some people the files hold medical information. As we move through the aging process, adoptees are confronting health conditions that can be deadly because we don't have access to our medical records, and that could be avoidable if we just had access.

—Laura Klunder, adoptee raised in the U.S. (Interview 2013)

This chapter presented the diverse accounts of adult Korean adoptees who have experienced original family search in one way or another: those who have reunited, those who have not, and those representing the wide spectrum of experiences in between. This chapter also considered adoptees who have decided against pursuing a search. I outlined the history of Korean-led post adoption services, ranging from programs established by the four remaining adoption agencies to the formation of Korea Adoption Services (KAS), formerly known as Korea Central Adoption Resources (KCARE). In order to understand the dynamics of power and resistance at the site of original family search, I framed overseas Korean adoption as an industry that has prospered off the separation of families in the past.

Through the lens of adoptees' experiences, I identified some of the obstacles that impede reunion. One common issue is adoptees' struggle to access their original adoption files. The adoption agencies argue that the adoption files are their property, and they are protecting the confidentiality and best interests of the parents of origin by not disclosing the files to the adoptees. They operate under the assumption that original parents do not want reunion nor wish to pursue a relationship with their now-adult child, demonstrated through the relinquishment of their child decades ago or failure to respond to a telegram. For this reason, the agencies are often hesitant to pursue a search on behalf of the adoptee, especially when the mother of origin was unwed at the time of relinquishment. There is a risk the mother's current life will be disrupted, and she will blame the adoption agency for not protecting her privacy. However, the stories I



presented challenge that assumption, demonstrating there is not necessarily a tension between an adoptee's right to know and an original parent's right to privacy.

I also focused on the ways adult adoptees and their allies have responded to power and practiced resistance against these systems. One evident example of practices of resistance against power is the coalition of adult adoptees and their allies who are pursuing law revisions to Special Adoption Law. They have effectively enacted change and undermined power through their contestation of the present legal order. I also turned to G.O.A.'L's birth family search department, particularly its annual First Trip Home program, as a creative kind of resistance practice. While many adoptees continue to struggle for their records and locate their families of origin, the fact that the topic of search and reunion has entered public Korean discourse is remarkable. Without adoptee rights activism, programs that support search and reunion for adoptees, and the sheer determination of adult adoptees themselves, thousands of families may have never been reunited, and millions of questions may still be unanswered.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### An Activist Coalition and the Rights of Single Mother Families

With a full pregnancy, I worked at a convenient store. I had to work day and night, sometimes overtime. As I saved for the hospital fee, my co-worker, a middle-aged lady who noticed my pregnancy, told my boss. Immediately the boss fired me, though I cried and begged for work...I gave birth, and I wept quietly. I decided to send my daughter Ah-jeong for adoption...One day before the adoption day of Ah-jeong, I gave a call to the adoption agency and explained to them I changed my mind and would like to bring back Ah-jeong to me...I had to pay 200,000 won (\$170 USD) to the adoption agency in order to bring back Ah-jeong, so I had to borrow money from my neighbor...I explained to my parents about Ah-jeong. However, my parents were so poor, living with 400,000 won (\$340 USD) monthly rented house with 2 million won (\$1,700 USD) deposit, so they told me to send Ah-jeong for adoption.

—Unwed mother, 4th Single Moms' Day Conference Human Library Panel

### Introduction

In May of 2014, I found myself seated on stage in front of hundreds during Single Moms'



Image 4.1: The 4th Singles Moms' Day Conference, Human Library, Seoul, Korea (May 2014)

Day, a day dedicated to supporting Korea's single mothers,<sup>120</sup> as well as original mothers who have been separated from their children through adoption in the past. Single Moms' Day was first organized in 2011 as a direct response to Adoption Day an annual holiday declared by the Ministry of Health and Welfare in 2006 to raise awareness of adoption and promote domestic adoption among Korean families. Run by a coalition comprised of an adoptee returnee activists, representatives from

several single-parent organizations, members of an unwed mother's organization, and a Korean-

<sup>120</sup> Unwed mother, the preferred term of unwed mother activists, refers to women who have children outside of marriage. The term single mother describes all mothers who are single, including unwed mothers, divorced mothers, widowed mothers, etc.

run NGO that supports adoptee returnees and single mother families, this year's Single Moms' Day events included a conference, human library<sup>121</sup> panel, and film screening of a documentary about single mother families in Korea. As an adoptee who was born to an unwed Korean mother, I was asked to participate in the human library component of Single Moms' Day. I wrote a personal reflection, which was published in the conference booklet, and also shared this reflection onstage alongside four other women: a mother who lost her child to overseas adoption over thirty years ago, an unwed mother, a single, divorced mother of four, and an American adoptive mother to two Korean adopted children. In revealing their stories, one of the goals of these mothers was to raise awareness of the challenges facing single mothers, particularly unwed mothers, and their children in Korea. Since the 1990s, over 90% of adopted children have been born to unwed mothers, yet a lack of financial, emotional, and other forms of support often place these women in the position of having to relinquish their children. Arguably, an even more significant goal of these mothers and organizers lay in their demand for the Korean government to provide greater support for single parent families and prioritize family preservation over domestic adoption.

This chapter presents a number of complex and often contentious issues directly related to unwed mother's rights, the family preservation versus domestic adoption debate, and revisions of Korea's Special Adoption Law. While I approached resistance as embodying creative, everyday, and more nuanced forms in previous chapters, I now explore political, organized sites of resistance among adult adoptee returnees, those whose rights they advocate, and their allies. In this chapter, power takes form in the policies, programs, and campaigns that prioritize adoption

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<sup>121</sup> The concept of Human Library was first developed in Denmark in 2000, to promote human rights and social cohesion. A Human Library consists of "books" that are human, with each person providing stories of their lives in order to create greater understanding between people and help work through stereotypes and discrimination.

practices over family preservation, thereby contributing to the continued separation of original parents and their children due to reasons of poverty, divorce, among others. Resistance reveals itself in the activism and advocacy work of those who recognize adoption practices as an applied quick “fix” to Korea’s socioeconomic economic problems in the 21st century. In order to understand the dominant discourse of the “problem” of unwed mothers, and by extension mothers of origin, I begin by revisiting the history of family law reform in Korea, highlighting the institutions of family-head (*hoju*) and family registry (*hojŏk*). I investigate how the figure of disgraced unwed mother emerged, starting with the implementation of a patrilineal lineage system based on Neo-Confucian ideas in the Chosŏn and solidified during the Korean War and postwar periods. Next, I investigate a coalition that has formed among adult adoptee returnees, unwed and single mothers, original Korean family members who have been separated from a child or children through adoption, a Korean pastor and his wife who run an adoptee guesthouse in Seoul, and other allies. Specifically, I look at the role this coalition has played in Special Adoption Law revisions and in their activities to promote family preservation over adoption. Lastly, I investigate the controversial debate surrounding the baby box, which is directly tied to the 2011 revisions to Special Adoption Law. One common misconception of this coalition, particularly the adult adoptees who engage in activism and advocacy work, is their staunch opposition to and desire to end all adoption practices. Pro-adoption groups such as Mission to Promote Adoption in Korea (MPAK), a U.S.-based organization founded by a Korean American adoptee that aims to promote adoption among Korean and Korean American families and has ties with Korean adoption agencies, is one organization that, in the past, has expressed criticism to this goal.<sup>122</sup> On the contrary, what I hope to achieve in this chapter is to challenge this misconception, which is often used by critics to dismiss the activism and advocacy work of this

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<sup>122</sup> Steve Morrison, *Mission to Promote Adoption in Korea* (MPAK), *Blogspot*. <http://mpakusa.blogspot.com/>

coalition while advancing another agenda. To this end, I demonstrate this coalition's aim to reframe adoption as a human rights and social justice issue that brings single mother families rights to the forefront of discussion, as well as its support for ethical, legal, and transparent adoptions.

### **Family Law and the Confucian “Tradition”**

In order to understand the institutional and non-institutional discrimination against single mothers, particularly unwed mothers, we should first look at Korean family law legislated in 1957, with its grounding in Neo-Confucian “authentic tradition.” Originating from old Japanese Civil Code during the Meiji Restoration, the institutions of family-head (*hoju*), succession of family-headship, and family register (*hojök*) were imported to and imposed on Korea during the colonial period (1910-1945). Japanese legal scholars established the basis for what was “authentically” Korean based on their own family institution of the *Ie* (家; ka) institution. According to Hyunah Yang in her study on the history of family law within the history of legal feminism in Korea, not only was the *Ie* embodied in the patriarchal family, but it was also extended to the relationships among state, family, and the people.<sup>123</sup> With the Meiji imperial state modeled in the form of a family, the family-head system was used to tie the Emperor (parent) to his people (child)—a model that was replicated in colonial Korea as a way to strategically integrate the Korean people into the imperial Japanese “family.” In this way, Yang argues that in the process of imposition, the Korean family-headship was interpreted and tailored in a way that resulted in becoming “even more rigidly patrilineal than that of the original inventors in Japan based upon the ‘customs’ in Korea.”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Hyunah Yang, “Vision of Postcolonial Feminist Jurisprudence in Korea: Seen from the ‘Family-Head System’ in Family Law,” *Journal of Korean Law* 5, 2 (2006): 21.

Even after the colonization period, knowledge of what was authentically and traditionally Korean had “already been colored by the Japanese colonial gaze,” and nationalist legislators confused family practices with those for the elites (*yangban*) in the Chosŏn dynasty; thus, “the family issue in question was homogenized with, and frozen into, ‘the custom.’”<sup>125</sup> According to the family-head (*hoju*) system in family law, men were privileged as the legal head of the family. The order of succession was as follows: son, unmarried daughter, wife, father’s mother, daughter-in-law. With the death of the father, the eldest son inherited the role of family-head, and daughters were immediately removed from their fathers’ family registries (*hojŏk*) and transferred to their husbands once married. Key to understanding the effects on unwed mothers and their children is the stipulation in the family-head system that denied a child to adopt the mother’s surname or a stepfather’s surname. The signature of the biological father was legally required even after parents got divorced, in the case the mother had no contact with the biological father, and even if the children were in full custody of the mother. By placing the man as the legal head of the family, children were added to the father’s family register (*hojŏk*), and the father maintained legal rights of the children and remain on his *hojŏk* unless he granted permission to transfer. Large-scale revisions were made to family law in 1962, 1977, 1989, and 2005, but it was not until January of 2008 that the *hoju* system was abolished.

### **From “Virtuous Woman” to Unwed, Disgraced Original Mother**

Combined with patriarchal laws that have created discrimination and structural challenges for women in the family, it is also useful to look at how an official discourse of women through

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>125</sup> Hyunah Yang, “A Journey of Family Law Reform in Korea: Tradition, Equality, and Social Change.” *Journal of Korean Law* 8, 77 (December 2008): 91.

the definition of “virtuous women” was created and perpetuated by Confucian male elite of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910). According to Chungmoo Choi, the figure of “virtuous woman” emerged through the definition of and emphasis on Confucian values of chastity, filial piety, and loyalty.<sup>126</sup> The implementation of a patrilineal lineage system based on Neo-Confucian ideas had serious implications for Chosŏn women, and they found themselves, through legal changes, relegated to a subordinate position to that of men.<sup>127</sup> Patriarchal ideology, disguised as Confucian morals, demonized the female who lost her chastity before marriage or was violated by a man other than her husband. A virtuous aristocrat woman was to wear a dagger under her everyday attire, expecting to use this dagger to take her own life in the event she was touched by another man.

The figure of “virtuous woman” reemerged during the wartime period in which Korean sex workers came to symbolize the antithesis of a chaste, virtuous woman, often being regarded as traitors to the patriarchal constructed nation. The Korean women who provide sexual labor for U.S. and U.N. soldiers were often referred to as *yang kongju* (Western princess), in many cases “fallen women” from poor backgrounds and low class status even before entering the sex labor industry in the *kijich'on*.<sup>128</sup> Coupled with poverty, many of these women were also victims of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and turned towards military prostitution to feed themselves or family members after the war.

During the 1960's, many of these women were part of the migration flow from the countryside to the cities and were only able to find adequate pay in the camptowns. More than

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<sup>126</sup> Chungmoo Choi, “Korean Women in a Culture of Inequality,” *Korea Briefing* (Colorado, Westview Press: 1992) 104.

<sup>127</sup> Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Boston, Harvard University Asia Center, 1992) 231-282.

<sup>128</sup> Katherine H.S. Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations* (New York, Columbia University Press: 1997) 23.

thirty thousand women were making a living through the organized sexual servicing of American military personnel by this time. Other women had found that work in the sex industry provided greater financial opportunities when supporting some or all family members including a parent's medical treatment or sibling's school fees. Katherine H.S. Moon, a researcher of military prostitution in Korea, points to "Hyun Ja," a middle-aged, divorced Korean women with children who "became a GI prostitute as a last resort," having "no more than a grade-school education" and realizing that most "factory jobs catered mostly to young women."<sup>129</sup> Still, there were other women physically forced into prostitution against their will by family members, pimps, or fraudulent advertisements. One woman, for example, had been orphaned as a young child, adopted into a Korean family to serve as a slave, raped by the father, and later kicked out. Upon answering an advertisement for a restaurant job, she immediately found herself "beaten into submission and forced to provide sexual services to GIs."<sup>130</sup> A result of the relationships between these women and Western military men was the emergence of a population of multi-racial children. These children were situated within the first wave of overseas Korean adoptees, including, most notably, the eight adopted children of Harry and Bertha Holt. Through this, the figure of the disgraced original mother was born.

### **Reclaiming Subjectivities: A Coalition, a Movement, an Act of Resistance**

This chapter opened with one of the multiple activities organized by a coalition of adult adoptee returnees, unwed mothers, single mothers, original mothers who have been separated from a child or children through adoption, and Korean allies. What may initially appear as an

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<sup>129</sup> Cited by Katherine H.S. Moon, 23 from "My Sister's Place" *Newsletter* (Summer 1988) 2.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



unlikely combining of forces, I argue that the mobilization of these actors and organizations signifies an act of resistance against systems of power that have produced the figure of unwed mother while separating families. While not always aligned or working in tandem on the same campaigns and projects, there are a number of organizations that are contributing or have contributed to addressing the complex problems associated with Korea's long history of adoption. The following chart presents the main six organizations that have been active in this work over the years, though it should be acknowledged that other organizations and individuals not listed have contributed to these efforts as well:

Figure 4.1: *Organizations Engaged in Adoption-Related Activism and/or Advocacy Work*

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Year Formed</b>	<b>Primary Members</b>	<b>Activities</b>
Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (G.O.A.'L)	1997	Adoptees	Provides birth family searches, reunion, and post-reunion services, F-4 visa and dual citizenship support, language scholarships, etc.
KoRoot	2002	Koreans	A guesthouse for adoptee returnees and their families who wish to stay in Seoul and an NGO that engages in adoptee advocacy work.
Adoptee Solidarity Korea (ASK)	2004	Adoptees	Raises awareness and advocates change related to adoption practices through education and dialogue.
Mindeullae (Dandelions)	2006	Original Families	Support network for original family members who have been separated from their children through adoption. Holds campaigns that speak out against family separation and overseas adoption practices.
Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoptee Community of Korea (TRACK)	2007	Adoptees	Organizes direct, political action. Engages with Korean organizations, politicians, and lobbyists to hold adoption agencies accountable and enact legal change.

Korean Unwed Mothers and Families Association (KUMFA)	2009	Unwed Mothers	Provides education, counseling, and other forms of support for unwed mother families. Raises awareness about unwed mothers while pushing for greater legal and social rights.
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Source: Paul Y. Chang and Andrea Kim Cavicchi, 2015

The organizations that were not yet introduced nor discussed in the Post Adoption Service Organizations section of Chapter Three are Adoptee Solidarity Korea (ASK), Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoptee Community of Korea (TRACK), Korean Unwed Mothers and Families Association (KUMFA), and Mindeullae (Dandelions). While G.O.A.'L's focus is on providing services for adult adoptee returnees, such as original family search services, Adoptee Solidarity Korea (ASK) is an adoptee-run, activist organization founded in March 2004 by a group of adoptee returnees. Led by a steering committee consisting of four to eight members, ASK was first established to create a politicized space for adoptees to critically examine Korea's adoption practices and underlying issues. With particular attention focused on the social, cultural, and economic structures that facilitate overseas and domestic Korean adoption, ASK has pursued a number of programs and projects to examine the factors that contribute to growing the population of adoptable children.

Adoptee Solidarity Korea (ASK) is an adoptee-run, activist-based organization that was founded in March 2004 by a group of adopted Korean adults who lived and worked in Korea. The original intent behind creating such an organization was to create a more politicized space for adoptees and examine adoption practices through a critical lens. Framing overseas Korean adoption as a human rights and social justice issue, ASK has organized multiple programs, events, and study groups to examine the reasons why there was and remains a large population of "adoptable" children. Taken from ASK's mission statement, their aim is to address the problems

associated with Korean overseas adoption, and through education and activism, to raise awareness, advocate change, and support alternatives to overseas Korean adoption, more specifically, family preservation. Adoption is often framed as a humanitarian responsibility to orphaned and abandoned children. However, ASK has reframed this position so that marginalized subjects, who are often excluded from adoption discourses, including adoptees themselves, are recognized, empowered, and given voices. In the past, the members of ASK have formed coalitions with single and unwed mothers organizations, activists who demand greater rights for people with disabilities, child rights advocacy groups, etc.

Another activist organization that engages in similar work as ASK, and with whom ASK has worked on multiple, collaborative projects in the past, is Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoptee Community of Korea (TRACK). As the newest adoptee-run organization, TRACK was founded in July 2007 by three European and two American overseas adoptees with the main strategy of political mobilization and direct political action. Among TRACK's several contributions to policy change and organized action, some of its most notable projects were the spearheading of annual Single Moms' Day, its participation in revising Special Adoption Law, and holding the adoption agencies accountable for failing to practice legal and ethical adoptions. Additionally, TRACK participates in National Assembly audits of the Ministry of Health and Welfare, the ministry responsible for overseeing all domestic and overseas adoption activities, as well as audits of adoption-related organizations.

As the unwed mothers have been the dominant source of adopted children, a number that has grown steadily starting in the 1970s, unwed mother activists have also become a visible presence in recent years. Formerly known as Miss Mama Mia, Korean Unwed Mothers and Families Association (KUMFA) is the first organization that was started and run by unwed

mothers.<sup>131</sup> The main purpose of KUMFA is to provide unwed mothers with emotional, financial, and material support, though they also provide support for non-unwed single mothers as well. KUMFA offers counseling as well as education courses for its members, such as vocational training and parenting courses. Additionally, KUMFA recently opened a temporary safe house for single mothers and their children that houses twenty-four mothers and children each year, covering the costs of housing and medical bills for these families in crisis.

Lastly, Mindeullae (Dandelions) is an organization run by and for original family members who have been separated from their children through overseas adoption practices. Formed in 2006 by a group of original mothers, Mindeullae holds events, meetings, and counseling sessions for Korean families who continue to bear the stigma of relinquishing or losing a child to adoption. As there is a great amount of shame associated with this stigma, the members of Mindeullae have made efforts to bring their stories and experiences to the forefront in order to challenge the perception of these mothers as young and irresponsible for relinquishing their children. They have engaged in multiple events, such as Single Moms' Day, modeling their activities through frameworks of social justice and political intervention to support original mothers and find alternatives for overseas adoption.

### *Shifting the Focus from Domestic Adoption to the Rights of Unwed and Single Mothers*

As introduced at the beginning of this chapter, in 2006, the Ministry of Health and Welfare first declared May 11th as national Adoption Day in an effort to raise awareness of issues related to adoption in Korea while also encouraging Korean families to adopt. Promoting domestic adoption among Korean families was one strategy of the government's campaign to

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<sup>131</sup> Korean Unwed Mothers Support Network (KUMSN) is another unwed mothers organization, started in 2007 by Dr. Richard Boas, an American father of a Korean adoptee. Whereas KUMFA is recognized as a grassroots organization that engages in activism and support for unwed mother families, KUMSN's mission is to abolish the stigma against unwed mothers and their children through mainly academic research and public relations activities.

officially end the institution of overseas adoption. Organized by Korean Adoption Services (KAS) in recent years, adoptive families, foster care families, government officials, and allies are invited to attend weeklong celebrations of Adoption Day. This includes a large-scale event where a minister of the Ministry of the Health and Welfare shares a speech, adoptive parents share their stories of adoption, and children who have been adopted through Korea’s domestic adoption program perform songs and presentations. Also, in previous years select adult overseas adoptees have been invited to share their adoption experiences with event attendees.

While supporters of this day applaud the government’s efforts to spread awareness of domestic adoption and increase its practices among Koreans, the aforementioned coalition of adult adoptees, unwed mothers, single mothers, original families, and its allies argues the government is not doing enough. Their position has been reflected in the multiple events, conferences, and public campaigns they have organized over the past decade in order to call for the prioritization of family preservation and greater rights for single parent families. In 2009, for example, ASK organized a conference titled “Alternatives to Adoption: Building a Movement for Change” in direct response to Adoption Day. Event organizers invited a number of Korean organizations, including Korean Foster Care Association, Korean Unwed Mothers Support Network (KUMFA), Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center, A-Ha! Sexuality Education Counseling Center and TacTeen, to engage in a discussion of alternatives to adoption. In coalition with this conference, TRACK organized a highly visible and



Image 4.2: TRACK’s Puppet Performance, Seoul, Korea (2009) Photo from *Hankyoreh*, May 11, 2009.

provocative puppet performance and public education event in downtown Seoul in order to address the underlying issues of adoption and call for a day without adoption. Two large puppets, one of a bride and the other of an unwed mother who lost her child to adoption, were placed at the center of this performance. These coordinating events garnered much attention for their critical opposition to the government's Adoption Day campaign and eventually culminated in the declaration of Single Moms' Day in 2011.

According to Kim Stoker, one of ASK's steering committee members and representatives, a greater effort toward family preservation should be prioritized over domestic adoption and a number of alternatives adoptees need be explored:

The majority of the children available for adoption, whether domestic or international, are from unwed mothers who must relinquish their children not out of choice, but out of necessity due to the lack of social welfare support combined with patriarchy, poverty, and social stigmatization. Let's try to prevent adoption and create an alternative by supporting women's rights in South Korea where unwed mothers can keep their children.<sup>132</sup>

The government's prioritization of domestic adoption over family preservation is also reflected in the amount of financial support allocated to different groups. Currently, the Korean government offers a month allowance of 150,000 *wŏn* for domestic adoptive parents to cover the cost of childcare regardless of the parent's income. Single parents, including unwed and divorced mothers, receive a maximum of 100,000 *wŏn* per month, decreasing if the parent makes over 1.2 million *wŏn* per month (\$1,022 USD). Additionally, a low average monthly income of single-parent households and a lack of child support from fathers have only increased the burden of raising children as a single parent, particularly an unwed mother. While the average monthly income of Korean households hovered at 3.53 million *wŏn* per month (\$2,980 USD), the average

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<sup>132</sup> "Korean intercountry adoptees support birth mother's rights in South Korea, *The Hankyoreh*, May 11, 2009. [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/354259.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/354259.html).

monthly income of single-parent households was just half that at 1.72 million *wŏn* (\$1,448 USD).<sup>133</sup>

According to Korean Women's Development Institute (KWDI), the lack of monetary support from fathers also contributes to the financial difficulties of unwed and single mother families. Only 15.6% of 213 unwed and single mothers receive support from their children's fathers according to the recent survey.<sup>134</sup> Legally, fathers are obligated to provide for their children's financial needs, though the combination of a drawn out litigation process and 5 million *wŏn* price tag to file a lawsuit to receive child support make accountability challenging. A separate report of KWDI also reports that most mothers are not aware of the available benefits, and law that grant maternity leave and prohibit discrimination at work are not properly enforced.<sup>135</sup>

In addition to the financial struggles of single-parent families, there is a widespread image in public discourse, often perpetuated by the media, of the young, reckless, unwed teenage mother who carelessly abandons her child on the side of the road or, in the worst imaginable situation, commits infanticide. Though according to Dr. Helen Noh's presentation at Single Moms' Day conference, the average age of unwed mothers who are raising children is 25.1 years, and 77.3% of adult unwed mothers have college degrees.<sup>136</sup> There is also a tendency to position abortion and abandonment as alternatives to one another; it is better to relinquish a child for

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<sup>133</sup> Lee, Claire, "Birth Mothers Living in Silence," *Korea Herald* (January 28, 2015) <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150324001181>

<sup>134</sup> Korean Women's Development Institute (KWDI), "Strengthening the Responsibility of Unwed Fatherhood," *The 75th Women's Policy Forum Conference Summary* (2012).

<sup>135</sup> Mijeong Lee and Hyeyoun Kim, *How to Improve Government Welfare Services for Low-Income Unwed Mothers in Korea* (KWDI), 2009.

<sup>136</sup> Helen Noh, "Single Moms are Parents Too: Moving from a Society that Abandons Children to One that Raises Them," *4th Single Moms' Day Conference Book*, May 2014.

adoption and bestow the gift of life than seek an abortion. Single mother rights activists argue that this line of reasoning is flawed, for relinquishing a child to adoption is an alternative to parenting or fostering. While abortion practices are illegal, these activists argue that abortion is so prevalent in Korea that those who pursue an abortion are rarely the same women who carry their babies to full term. According to KUMFA's website, statistics released by the Ministry of Health and Welfare in 2007 reveal that out of 100 pregnancies of unwed women in Korea, ninety-six will have an abortion and only four will give birth. Of those four, three will relinquish their child due to economic difficulties and social discrimination. Therefore, "it's not far-fetched to assume that the four women who gave birth to their children, choosing to face social stigma and family rejection, likely wanted to raise their own child."<sup>137</sup>

All of these points were reiterated at the Single Moms' Day Conference by researchers and participants. As a complement to the conference, the human library event provided a space for mothers from multiple backgrounds to share their personal experiences and stories of how single motherhood and/or adoption has dramatically altered their lives. One unwed mother of the human library panel shared her story of being terminated by her boss upon the discovery of her out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Rather than opting for an abortion, she chose to bear and raise her child despite her extreme financial difficulties and lack of emotional support. In her words, many unwed and single mothers "suffer from a lack of information, and many social workers do not know what kind of help is available for single mothers. So many single moms do not know what to do and live with constant fear and sadness." It was only until she discovered KUMFA that she was able to receive formal training and secure a position at an NGO to help other single parents raise their children.

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<sup>137</sup> KUMFA homepage, *KUMFA*, Accessed October 6, 2015. <http://kumfa.or.kr/>



Another mother who spoke on the human library panel shared her relinquishment and reunion story as a representative of Mindeullae, an organization of original family members who have lost their children to adoption. As a young woman, she had been kidnapped off the streets by a man and soon found herself pregnant with his child. Choosing to raise her child, she struggled to survive and made the decision to temporarily leave her baby at a facility under the assumption she would be able to retrieve her child upon overcoming poverty through work. However, the owner of facility grew angry during her every visit to see her child telling her, “You are a penniless single mom, so if you raise the baby, the baby will be unhappy.” Over a short period of time, the owner persuaded this mother to send away her baby for overseas adoption to the USA, “saying [her] baby would grow up happily with a rich American family.” It was not until thirty-four years later that this mother of origin and her child, Soojung, who had been adopted to the United States, were reunited in Korea. Speaking of her daughter’s most recent birthday since their reunion, this original mother shared:

I got up early and cooked seaweed soup with *japchae* (stir-fried sweet potato noodle dish). I had cooked seaweed soup every single year, but this year was more meaningful. I took a photo of the seaweed soup and sent it to her, saying, ‘Happy birthday to you!’ Although I met her joyfully, how can I understand all her pain and fear? However, I never forgot you, even for one second in my life. My daughter Soojung, I am so sorry as a mom!<sup>138</sup>

By sharing stories of their struggles, difficulties, and dealings with discrimination at public events such as Single Moms’ Day, unwed and single mother activists, such as these two human library panel participants, hope to combine factual statistics with their personal experiences in order to disrupt the stigma of unwed and single mothers in Korea.

*Special Adoption Law: Revising Laws, Rewriting History*

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<sup>138</sup> Anonymous Mother of Origin, “I’m sorry, Soojung!” *4th Single Moms’ Day Conference Booklet*, Seoul: 2014.

We are creating something brand new, and that's about loving ourselves and loving our community. I think if they knew we would put ourselves back to the place where we were adopted away from, and then also build coalitions with our mothers and other people's mothers, [the government and adoption agencies] never would have done it! We didn't just go away. We are more powerful than ever, and that's kind of scary to them.

—Laura Klunder, adoptee raised in the U.S. (Interview 2013)

In addition to organizing annual Single Moms' Day in order to bring greater awareness to the struggles of single mother families, this coalition has made significant inroads toward enacting legal change and securing greater rights for single-parent families and adult adoptee returnees. Members of ASK, TRACK, KUMFA, Mindeullae, KoRoot, and Korean Public Interest Lawyers' Group (Gong-gam) gathered in 2009 to draft and submit revisions for Special Adoption Law (SAL) in order to reform adoption practices in Korea. In my interview with Kim Stoker, an adoptee activist, former representative of ASK, and one of the original participants of this coalition, she described how this process unfolded:

It started out when I got an email to my academic email address with a survey sent to a group of people. I think they thought I was Korean. I looked at it, and I sent it to G.O.A.'L and asked them to translate it. And that's how it first became known that the government was looking to revise Special Adoption Law, and they had put this survey out, but it wasn't given to adoptees, and it wasn't given to birth mothers. It was only given to adoptive parents and Koreans. So then we realized that they were revising this law but they hadn't talked to us, and of course the survey was due in five days or something. And after there were a series of public forums where Jane Trenka (TRACK) was very vocal about getting interpretation for adoptees so we could participate. All of that started, in many ways, very organically.

After months of attending these public forums and holding meetings to discuss how to proceed, this coalition began drafting revisions for Special Adoption Law. The main goal of this coalition was aimed at “protecting birth families, prospective children for adoption, as well as promotion of government social welfare policies.”<sup>139</sup> Criticizing the government for its lack of a coherent policy supporting family preservation and prioritization of domestic adoption over

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<sup>139</sup> Chang, Paul Y. Andrea Kim Cavicchi, “Claiming Rights: Organizational and Discursive Strategies of the Korean Adoptee and Unwed Mothers Movement,” *Korea Observer* 46, 1 (Spring 2015): 222.

family preservation, this coalition demanded the government “take responsibility of providing social welfare support to unwed mothers and protect birth families.”<sup>140</sup>

On June 29, 2011, the revised SAL was passed by the National Assembly and went into effect on August 5, 2012. While not all of the coalition’s demands were met, compromise was made, and a number of key revisions were accepted and written into the new law. Three significant amendments were written into the new law: (1) establishment of a court system to oversee the registration of children relinquished to adoption; (2) implementation of a seven day wait period for mothers before placing a child for adoption; and (3) mandatory registration of all births with the government. The rationale behind the creation of (1) was to create more transparency throughout the adoption process and decrease the number of cases in which a child is illegally removed from the mother and/or through intimidation and coercion. Representatives from Mideullae attested to this by sharing their experiences of losing a child to adoption, many of whose children were taken away without their knowledge or consent. For example, Mideullae President, Myung-ja Noh, has spoken publicly on multiple occasions of how the loss of her son dramatically altered her life. Her story of loss, reunion, and post reunion experiences with her adult son, who was adopted to the United States as an infant, was documented in the film, *Resilience*, directed and co-produced by Korean American adoptee, filmmaker, and activist, Tammy Chu.<sup>141</sup> According to Noh’s account, she bore a son at the age of eighteen and struggled to make ends meet because the father of her child gambled all their money away and refused to work. While she was away searching for work in order to support her child, the father took their infant son to his in-laws and left him on their doorstep. Noh’s mother, aunt, and cousin decided it

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 222.

<sup>141</sup> *Resilience*. DVD. Directed by Tammy Chu. 2010; Seoul, Korea: *Nameless Films*, 2011.

would be best to take the young baby to a local orphanage and keep this a secret from Noh when she returned. After desperately searching for her baby in vain, Noh fell into a reckless lifestyle of drinking and wandering:

I needed to see him before I died. I wanted to tell him how I lived, that I didn't send him away, but tell him what really happened. He needs to know his roots... You know, some say if you lose your health, you've lost everything. But not me, I lost everything when I lost my child. I lived recklessly because I had no reason to live... What's the use of living when I've lost my child? I've lived with that thought everyday. If only I had taken my baby with me, we wouldn't have been separated like this.<sup>142</sup>

Although reunited with her son thirty-something years later, Noh expresses the lasting impact of losing her child to adoption, including unresolved grief, guilt, and trauma with which she continues to struggle. Due to her own experiences as a mother of origin, Noh has become greatly active in the movement to prioritize family preservation over adoption and demand greater social welfare services for single mother families. She, along with other original mothers of Mindeulla, played a key role in the drafting of Special Adoption Law revisions by sharing their stories of loss and separation.

In addition to the seven-day waiting period stipulated in (2), new mothers are also required to receive counseling. This, SAL proponents argue, will allow new mothers the time to understand their rights and make informed choices before relinquishing a child. Also taken into consideration during discussions of this key point were the pregnant women who had stayed in residential care facilities run by adoption agencies, oftentimes being coerced into signing over their parental rights prior to giving birth. Shannon Heit, an adoptee activist and volunteer coordinator for KUMFA explained, "Half of the unwed mothers' facilities in the country are currently run by adoption agencies, which is a clear conflict of interest. Many of the unwed mothers homes run by adoption agencies only accept mothers who are giving up for adoption or

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

mothers who have a higher likelihood of choosing adoption (mothers who are younger with no family or support network).”<sup>143</sup> These facilities for unmarried pregnant women became a main concern in that they created conditions where expecting mothers felt pressured, and even times intimidated, into relinquishing their children. If a mother changed her mind, deciding to raise her child during her stay in one of these facilities, she was often forced to reimburse the facility for rent, food, and other incurred expenses. Officially, a ban against adoption agencies from operating residential shelters for pregnant women became effective from July 1, 2015.

Lastly, the push for (3) mandatory registration of all births reflected the aim to eliminate illegal, anonymous abandonments, thereby providing birth records to adoptees. As discussed in the previous chapter, search for original family proved challenging even when the adoptee’s file contained identifying information of the original parents. Adoptees who were abandoned possess no such identifying information and have a significantly less likely chance of achieving reunion. Requiring the registration of all births provides an avenue for adoptees to trace their history. Yet, opponents of this revision argue that this law, “designed to help grown adoptees locate their birth families by forcing unwed birthmothers to register their babies in their family registry so the record will be available for returning adoptees” has no “regard to the reality of the Korean adoption culture.”<sup>144</sup> Pro-adoption groups such as Mission to Promote Adoption in Korea (MPAK)<sup>145</sup> argue that these new laws force birthmothers to register their babies, with the great majority afraid that their past “improprieties will go recorded and remain with their records for

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<sup>143</sup> Deva Lee and Jenny Na, “A Silent Sacrifice, A Human Cost,” *Groove Magazine* (September 17, 2014) <http://groovekorea.com/article/silent-sacrifice-human-cost/>.

<sup>144</sup> Steve Morrison, “The Irony of Adoption Law that Blocks Adoption,” *MPAK* (January 10, 2013) <http://mpakusa.blogspot.com/2013/01/the-irony-of-adoption-law-that-blocks.html>.

<sup>145</sup> According to its website, MPAK’s mission is to “promote adoption in Korea, and to bring about positive changes to the Korean adoption culture and to advocate the needs of homeless children to have homes of their own.” Established in 1999 in the U.S. by Steve Morrison, an adoptee who has born in the 1950s and resided in an orphanage in Korea for eight years before being adopted to the U.S. at age 14.

life.”<sup>146</sup> This fear, MPAK argues, has led to a spike in anonymous abandonments since the enactment of SAL revisions. Groups like MPAK argue that the baby box is a method of saving these unwanted children, a box where unwed mothers and other families are able to anonymously abandon their children who otherwise would have “been abandoned on the streets,” or worse, murdered by their own mothers.

### **Unwed Mothers, Child Abandonment, and the Baby Box**

Imagine a large river with a high waterfall. At the bottom of this waterfall hundreds of people are working frantically trying to save those who have fallen into the river and have fallen down the waterfall, many of them drowning. As the people along the shore are trying to rescue as many as possible one individual looks up and sees a seemingly never-ending stream of people falling down the waterfall and begins to run upstream. One of other rescuers hollers, “Where are you going? There are so many people that need help here.” To which the man replied, “I’m going upstream to find out why so many people are falling into the river.”

—Saul Alinsky, in Sheldon & Macallair<sup>147</sup>

I investigate the contentious debates surrounding the baby box—a box set up Pastor Jong-rak Lee in December 2009, making it possible for parents or anyone else to anonymously abandon a child. The baby box and Pastor Lee’s efforts have garnered a great amount of media attention in Korea and also on an international level. While some have celebrated Pastor Lee and the baby box as mercifully saving babies who would have otherwise died by infanticide or been abandoned on the street, adoptee rights and unwed mother advocates accuse him and the media attention surrounding the baby box of facilitating illegal, child abandonment. In this section, I present the background of this debate and both sides of the argument through a close reading of the documentary film, *The Drop Box*.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Randall G. Sheldon and Daniel Macallair, *Juvenile Justice in America: Problems and Prospects* (Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 2008).

On March 3, 2015, *The Drop Box*, a documentary film, was released in select theaters for three days throughout the United States. Directed by American filmmaker Brian Ivie and presented by Focus on the Family, a conservative Christian group, this film tells the story of Korean Pastor Lee Jong-rak who built a “baby box” outside of his home. This baby box makes it possible for anyone, specifically unwed mothers, to anonymously abandon their



Image 4.3: The Baby Box, Jusrang Community Church, Seoul, Korea (2014)

children. *The Drop Box* celebrates Pastor Lee’s efforts by presenting a narrative of his life, his rationale behind creating the baby box, and the work he is doing to care for his own adopted children and others he temporarily fosters, mainly children who face mental and physical challenges. As described on *The Drop Box*’s official website, this film explores “the physical, emotional, and financial toll associated with providing refuge to orphans that would otherwise be abandoned on the streets.”<sup>148</sup> The website points out that this “is also a story of hope—a reminder that every human life is sacred and worthy of love.”

As MPAK and other supporters of the baby box argue, revisions of Special Adoption Law have forced some unwed mothers into a panic due to the change that now requires them to register the birth of their child. When taking into consideration the continued stigma attached to unwed pregnancy, this registration will remain on the mother’s registry permanently, precluding her from certain employment or making her a less desirable candidate in marriage in the future. MPAK cites that through 2013, 48.8% of unwed mothers mentioned Special Adoption Law as

<sup>148</sup> The Drop Box website, 2016 [Accessed March 2015] <http://www.thedropboxfilm.com/>.

the main cause for abandoning their child in the baby box. Many wished to relinquish their babies at an adoption agencies, but the law revisions forbid the agencies from accepting them without formal registration. “In other words, the law forbids them to relinquish their unwanted children anonymously, so they have abandoned their babies in massive numbers,” Morrison argues in his blog. Additionally, “Not all the children are wound up safely at the baby box. There are many cases of children being killed throughout Korea.”<sup>149</sup> *The Drop Box* features Morrison’s support of the baby box and call to overturn these revisions as a strategy to decrease the number of abandonments and infanticides throughout Korea.

On the opposing side of this debate stand members of the Special Adoption Law coalition and others, including single and unwed mother activist organizations in Korea. They argue that this film and supporters of the baby box present a limited and distorted perspective of this situation, with the baby box serving as a temporary fix for systemic problems. *The Drop Box* glorifies the baby box and, in doing so, exacerbates these problems by presenting child abandonments as inevitable while demonizing unwed mothers. This film, they argue, fails to acknowledge any of the economic, cultural, or social factors that have forced many unwed mothers and vulnerable families into relinquishing their children. What is even more alarming, they point out, is the film’s inaccurate portrayal of unwed mothers as potential baby killers or selfish women who will recklessly abandon their children on the side of the road if it were not for the baby box. The following section reframes some of the key issues addressed in *The Drop Box* by approaching the issues of child abandonment and unwed motherhood through the lens of social justice and single mothers’ rights.

### *Reframing the Issues*

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<sup>149</sup> Steve Morrison, “How Long Must This Go On? - The Continued Abandonments and Murders of Children in Korea” *MPAK*, February 17, 2014. <http://mpakusa.blogspot.com/2014/02/how-long-must-this-go-on-continued.html>.



This is a matter of the heart. There needs to be a huge overhaul in our thinking, the thinking of our youth of what life is, and the inherent value. Because if that inherent value of the baby's life is not there, there is always going to be babies dumped in the trash, flushed down the toilet.”

–The Drop Box (2015)

## 1. Infanticide

Citing that 60% of the mothers who abandon their children in the baby box are teenagers, this film perpetuates the stereotype of the young, irresponsible mother who will turn to infanticide as an alternative to legal relinquishment or parenting. As presented in a previous section, the average age of unwed mothers who are raising children is well above the teenage years, and the number of infanticides has remained stable since the creation of the baby box. As relinquishment is most often the alternative to parenting, it cannot be assumed all women who abandon their children in the baby box would have turned to infanticide or irresponsible abandonment as an alternative to baby box abandonment. While baby box supporters point out the rise of child abandonments since the Special Adoption Law revisions, opponents highlight statistical change due to the baby box: the number of abandonments has dramatically increased since the creation of the baby box and the spike in its media coverage starting in late 2012. In 2008, the year before the baby box was established, sixty-three children were reported abandoned. In 2013, 225 children were reported abandoned, 208 of whom were left in the baby box.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Ministry of Health and Welfare of the Republic of Korea (MOHAW), Han'guk ūi Kukoe Ibyang Hyōnhwang (1958-2013) [The Current State of Korea's Domestic and Overseas Adoptions (1958-2013)] (Seoul: South Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2013).

Figure 4.2: *Abandonments in South Korea*

	2006	2007	2008	2009 <sup>151</sup>	2010	2011	2012	2013
Baby Box Abandonments	—	—	—	—	4	25	67	208
Non-Baby Box Abandonments	88	87	63	52	58	102	72	17
Total Number of Abandonments	88	87	63	52	62	127	139	225

Source: Ministry of Health and Welfare (2013)

While the direct correlation between the media attention of the baby box and baby box abandonments has not been proven, this is the argument employed by baby box opponents to explain the spike in the number of abandonments from Special Adoption Law revisions.

## 2. An Insufficient Mental Health System and Lack of Social Welfare Support for Unwed Mothers and Their Children

Through the majority of the film, *The Drop Box* draws a link between the baby box and children who face physical and mental challenges, alluding to mental health issues in children as a leading factor in the decision of abandonment. According to a comprehensive study conducted by The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Ministry of Health and Welfare on the mental health system in South Korea in 2006, despite the recent development of a long-term mental health plan to advance its national mental health system, its budget for mental health still are insufficient compared to other developed countries.<sup>152</sup> This study points out the disorganization in these facilities and also the lack of community residential facilities, and

<sup>151</sup> The baby box first set up in December 2009

<sup>152</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO), “WHO-Aims Report on Mental Health System in Republic of Korea (Gwacheon, WHO and Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2006)

facilities for children and adolescents. Even while Korea has a sufficient number of professional experts in the area of mental health, mental health care continues to be separated from general health care, contributing to the current social stigma against mental illness.<sup>153</sup> Taking this into consideration, SAL revisions proponents/baby box opponents call for the government to provide greater support and resources for these children and families who struggle with mental health issues rather than providing the baby box as a temporary solution and alternative to developing a stronger national mental health system. Moreover, *The Drop Box* blurs the distinction between the pastor's non-baby box, adopted children, most of whom have physical challenges and Down Syndrome, and the babies who have passed through the baby box. According to a pamphlet distributed by Jusarang, Pastor Lee's church, 37 of the 289 babies who came through the baby box had physical or mental challenges. However, it is important to note that premature babies are categorized as physically challenged, which accounts for a large percentage of these 37 babies.

Additionally, *The Drop Box* fails to connect baby box abandonments and social and economic struggles that unwed mothers encounter in Korea. As mentioned in a previous section, unwed mothers with children under 12 years receive the maximum amount of 100,000 *wŏn* (\$85 USD) per month, decreasing if the parent makes over 1.2 million *wŏn* per month (\$1,022 USD). Child support from fathers is rarely pursued due to a long litigation process and hefty legal fees, and single mothers also face discrimination in the workforce, oftentimes fired on the spot when their status is discovered. Korean unwed mother activists argue that, due to systemic structures, many often feel as if they have no choice other than to anonymously abandon their children or legally relinquish their parental rights.

### 3. Parents Who Reclaim Their Children

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 5.

According to an article published by SBS<sup>154</sup>, 383 babies or children were left in the baby box between December 2009 and February 2014. Of these 383 babies and children, 120 of their parents returned to the baby box to reclaim them. Highlights the number of children who have been abandoned since the creation of the baby box, *The Drop Box* makes no mention of parents who returned for their babies a day, days, or any period of time after leaving their child in the baby box. In that 120 parents changed their minds, returned to the baby box, and brought their babies home to raise them, baby box opponents argue this suggests these parents did not have the intention of killing or abandoning them on the streets. Shannon Heit and adoptee and unwed mother advocate cogently articulated the following to me:

It's faulty logic to assume that if the baby box were not there, mothers would abandon their kids on the side of the road. The fact that these mothers went out of their way to leave their child in the box instead of on the side of the road shows they are invested in the well-being of their child. By the same logic, we may assume that if the baby box didn't exist, mothers would go one step further and ensure their baby is relinquished legally and ethically. The baby box provides a moral grey space for mothers who are in these situations who, I strongly believe, would give up for ethical adoption or choose to raise their child if the economic and social support was provided to them. Even worse, like in my situation where my grandmother gave me and my sister up for adoption without my mother's consent, the baby box also creates a situation where people who are not the mother or father can leave a child there.

Heit went on further to explain the illegality of abandonment in Korea. The baby box, therefore, facilitates and encourages illegal abandonments, while a more constructive action would be to educate expecting mothers on their rights, options, and obligations to their children. Additionally, there will always be mothers who are unwilling or incapable of raising their own children. In these cases, baby box opponents support the legal relinquishment of children at adoption agencies, hospitals, and police stations accompanied by legal and ethical adoptions.

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<sup>154</sup> Stephanie McDonald, "Opinion divided on the merits of South Korean pastor's 'baby box'" (March 2, 2015) <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2014/02/11/opinion-divided-merits-south-korean-pastors-baby-box>

#### 4. Orphans Who Are Not Orphans

Following the premiere of *The Drop Box* movie was a pre-recorded panel discussion with director, Brian Ivie; Mary Beth Chapman, president of Show Hope, an internationally recognized voice for orphan advocacy; Kelly Rosati, Focus on the Family's vice president of community outreach; and Dr. Sharen Ford, Focus on the Family's program director of adoption and orphan care. In an interview with WORLD news group, Brian Ivie shared that he "became a Christian while making this film. What I didn't expect is that when I was going to go make a film about saving Korean babies that God was going to save me." The panelists, including two American adoptive parents, urged the audience to follow God's will by supporting orphans throughout the world and adopting them.

In Korean adoptee Susan Cox's essay collection, "Voices from Another Place," she writes: "Adoptees are usually identified and defined as children. That we mature, grow up and come into our own wisdom is often not acknowledged. We can and wish to speak for ourselves." As countless adult adoptee returnees struggle to obtain their adoption records from their adoption agencies, many draw the link between the baby box and a population of people who will never have access to their own information, including personal and medical histories. Similar to adult adoptees who were anonymously abandoned decades ago, children who are anonymously abandoned in the baby box will never have access to their information and someday find themselves in similar positions with adult adoptees who struggle to reunite with their families of origin. In this way, baby box opponents, particularly adult adoptee activists, argue that the baby box is a temporary solution that facilitates illegal abandonments and grows the population of Korean adoptees who will never have access to their personal histories.

### *A Second Baby Box Averted*

“Pastor plans to open ‘baby box’ for foreigners,” read the headline of an article in *The Korea Times* in early 2014. Pastor Hae-sung Kim of Global Sarang, a group assisting migrants in Korea, described his plans to provide options for single foreign mothers, specifically a baby box in a neighborhood in Seoul with a large foreign population. Kim said the idea to create a baby box came after he attempted to assist a teenage girl of Korean ethnicity and Chinese nationality who had given birth under grave circumstances. “I had to do something for foreigners living in Korea, as the government does nothing for them, just because they are not Koreans,” Kim was quoted in the article. Almost immediately after this article was published online, posts on ASK, TRACK, KoRoot, and KUMFA Facebook pages and websites began to appear, most of which expressed dismay and opposition to the opening of a second baby box. Shortly thereafter, Pastor Kim of KoRoot and a number of adult overseas adoptees reached out to Pastor Kim of Global Sarang and requested an emergency meeting to which he agreed. On the day of the meeting, Pastor Kim of KoRoot and six overseas adult adoptees shared their personal views, expressing how baby boxes facilitate anonymous abandonments and create a population of children who will never have access to their personal and medical histories. By the end of the meeting, Pastor Hae-sung Kim, in his own words, “changed [his] course” and adopted a new perspective: “Rather than [opening] a baby box where babies are thoughtlessly abandoned, even if the pregnancy is unwanted, I will provide support from the beginning of pregnancy until childbirth, and also child-rearing.”<sup>155</sup> Three months later, Pastor Kim of Global Sarang was invited to participate in Single Moms’ Day Conference as a panel presenter and ally of the adoptee, single mother, and original family coalition. While there, he shared the story of how his

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<sup>155</sup> Haesung Kim, “Setting up a Crisis Pregnancy, Birth, and Child-rearing Center,” *4th Single Moms’ Day Conference Booklet*, Seoul: 2014.

perspective on single mothers and baby boxes significantly transformed during his meeting with adult adoptees who advocate family preservation and greater rights for single mother families. Listening to their stories, he “thought about the human rights of the abandoned children” for the first time and was able to understand the “despair” that some adoptees experience when they fail to “find their roots.” In the place of a baby box, he pledged to establish a crisis pregnancy, birth, and child-rearing support center for women who struggle with their pregnancies and/or raising a child as an unwed mother. While this is just one step toward achieving the goals of this activist coalition, it is a remarkable victory for those who champion the rights of single mothers and their children and other vulnerable families at risk.

## **Conclusion**

During recent discussions with baby box opponents, adoptee activists, and other members of the SAL revisions coalition, they relayed to me a number of new revisions that are pending in the National Assembly, such as an amendment that would effectively prohibit an employer from obtaining an unwed mother’s family registry and using it as a basis for termination. Another revision would allow a single parent, either mother or father, to register the birth of a child, whereas previously signatures of both parents were required. The following are the main points consistently reiterated by members of this coalition in their call to the Korean government for greater reforms:

- Provide unwed and single mother families with greater financial support;
- Enforce child support obligations for fathers;
- Increase the privacy of the registration system so that only unwed and single mothers can access their registries;

- Create an agency that provides counseling for unwed and single mothers so that women are correctly informed about the Special Adoption Law, their options, rights, and obligations to their children;
- Make it illegal to discriminate against unwed mothers in the workforce;
- Prioritize family preservation over adoption.

These efforts, among others, are one step toward the ratification and implementation of the Hague Convention. On May 2013, the Ministry of Health and Welfare signed the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption in the Netherlands, which, if implemented properly, will improve the child welfare situation in Korea. It was determined that Korea has made significant inroad to join the convention, as demonstrated by its extensive revisions to Special Adoption Law. One of the main principles of the convention is to prioritize the following in the order from most to least desirable: ensuring the child stay with his/her own family; domestic adoption; overseas adoption; institutional care. It is the hope of this coalition that the ratification of the Hague Convention and other steps taken toward directly addressing the complex problems associated with Korea's history of adoption, such as providing greater economic and social support to vulnerable families, may someday lead to the extinction of overseas adult adoptees.

This chapter presented a number of complex and often contentious issues directly related to unwed mother's rights, the family preservation versus domestic adoption debate, revisions of Korea's Special Adoption Law, and the baby Box. As I argued, resistance reveals itself in the activism and advocacy work of those who recognize adoption practices and the baby box as an applied quick "fix" to Korea's socioeconomic economic problems in the 21st century. I investigated the coalition that has formed among adult adoptee returnees, unwed and single mothers, original Korean family members who have been separated from a child or children



through adoption, a Korean pastor and his wife who run an adoptee guesthouse in Seoul, and other allies. Arguably, the formation of this coalition itself signifies an act of resistance against systems of power that separated adoptees from their families of origin and continues to separate single mother families and other vulnerable families, such as those who struggle with mental health issues. In the history of adoption in Korea, the revisions of Special Adoption Law in 2011 were momentous and historic. For the first time in history, those whose subjectivities were produced through the adoption industry and other complex systems of power have built coalitions and, in an act of solidarity, directly challenged the very institutions and sources of power that constituted their subjectivities. American adoptee Randy Tarnowski expressed to me the following:

What adoptee activists are doing here is so important and significant. But there is a sadness when I reflect on the history and future of Korean adoptees. We are a blip on the map, and if we are truly working toward some kind of reform or major change and are successful, we will cease to exist. This is ironic in a lot of ways and also kind of sad to me.

Indeed, if the trend of overseas adoption continues on its current trajectory, the efforts toward family preservation and ethical, legal domestic adoption will, essentially, lead to the further decline and eventual departure of overseas adult adoptees from Korea's future history. While "sad" by many accounts, those who participate in this activism and advocacy work in Korea continue to strive toward the potential of social justice protection to promote social justice outcomes for all groups in Korean society.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

I think these people are extremely ungrateful to their adopted parents, extended families and the countries where they were raised. They are lucky people loved them. There is nothing about magical birth families. Just because you are biologically connected to another mother, another father and their family groups means nothing. The people who love, feed, clothe you, burp you as a baby, nurse your wounds and illnesses as a child, teach you how to get along in the world, are your “real” family. It is sad that these people get to the age of 30 or so and have no clue about what family is.

—Maggie, Comments section of *The New York Times Magazine*<sup>156</sup>

As an adoptive mother of a Korean-born child, now 6, I could not disagree with you more. My daughter is not lucky to have been born to parents who felt unable to take care of her, to have transitioned through several homes and settings before arriving in another country with her final set of parents. She loves me and her father deeply, and simultaneously misses her unknown family in Korea. Why is it so hard to imagine that she can hold both feelings simultaneously? She has two real families. That is her truth.

—M, Comments section of *The New York Times Magazine*

I'm sickened by how Laura Klunder treated her parents. What a victim complex she has. And how delusional to think that the place she spent her first couple of months is somehow her ‘real home’...She’s an infant. She doesn’t yet have a culture. The whole premise that a person is deeply and inherently connected to a country’s culture just because of their skin color and because they spent a little time in the country before they could speak is absurd.

—Nina, Comments section of *The New York Times Magazine*

...The comments saying adoptees should be grateful, that biological families aren’t always wonderful, that being raised in an orphanage would be worse than being adopted into a loving American family—to you, I say, you don’t understand. And maybe you don’t need to understand. But I wish you would show more compassion...Adoptees are so rarely allowed to grieve our losses—loss of family, language, culture, history, identity. We are expected to be grateful, to count our blessings. I love my parents, deeply. And I also need to grieve for all that is lost.

—An adult Korean adoptee, Comments section of *The New York Times Magazine*

On January 14, 2015, the article “Why a Generation of Adoptees Is Returning to South Korea” was published online in *The New York Times Magazine*, eliciting nearly 1000 comments from readers and sparking a contentious online debate in multiple forums. From adoptees of all backgrounds, to adoptive parents, to individuals who identified as having no immediate connection to adoption, the content of this article pulled at the heartstrings of many and became a leading topic of discussion among numerous adoptees in Korea. This article highlighted the

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<sup>156</sup> Comments from “Why a Generation of Adoptees Is Returning to South Korea,” *The New York Times Magazine*, January 14, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/18/magazine/why-a-generation-of-adoptees-is-returning-to-south-korea.html> [accessed January 20, 2015].

experiences, perspectives, and stories of a number of Korean adoptees who returned to Korea as adults, all of whom I either personally interviewed or met in passing at adoption-related events during my time in Seoul. One adoptee who was featured in this article was Laura Klunder, an adoptee I interviewed and who, in this article, was depicted as being critical of her own adoption and ungrateful toward her adoptive parents. Personally knowing and having worked extensively with Klunder, however, the adoption story she shared with me is far more complex than what was conveyed in this article. Moreover, her main intention as an adoptee activist and licensed social worker is to work toward sustainable solutions that will keep Korean families intact. Due to what she believes is an incomplete narrative despite sharing her full views and experiences with the author of the article, Klunder received particularly harsh feedback in the comments section of the article. The terms “ungrateful,” “angry,” and “misguided” were mentioned in multiple comments alongside her name. Reflecting on this article, the heated responses and controversy that unfolded served as a two-fold reminder: adoptees who are critical of adoption practices and engage in adoption reform activism are often perceived as being ungrateful and angry, and the issue of adoption has long been and continues to be polarized by different views and approaches.

In my dissertation, I aimed to explore the lives, experiences, and perspectives of adult adoptee returnees in Korea, including those who engaged in advocacy work and activism as partly reflected in *The New York Times Magazine* article. Drawing on the contributions of Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau, I explored the ways that systems of power and control mechanisms have impacted on the lives of adult Korean adoptees, single and unwed mothers, and other members of Korean society who have been affected by Korea’s adoption practices. By investigating the historical, social, and economic processes involved, we were able to see the

complex and sometimes contradictory ways that power manifests in political forms, such as policies and government-sponsored campaigns aimed to control population growth, the adoption industry, and social interactions. In response to power, I investigated a broad spectrum of resistance practices performed by adoptee returnees, ranging from those of a political and action-oriented nature to individual, less visible, everyday practices. In this way, I emphasized that there exists multiple and diverse forms of resistance practices, and many adoptees themselves may not necessarily think of their actions as embodying resistance.

The everyday practice of cross-cultural or linguistic code-switching, for example, is one method adoptees often employ to navigate spaces in Korea. Adoptees engage in cross-cultural and/or linguistic code-switching in order to manage conflict, fit in, and for a number of other reasons. This mode of consumption reflects a more nuanced form of resistance within a dominant social and cultural system that enables adoptees to function appropriately to their own ends. On the other end of the spectrum lies resistance in the form of political activism and coalition building. Over the years, adult adoptee returnees have formed seemingly unlikely coalitions with unwed and single mothers, original family members, and other allies in order to enact legal change that would effectively reform adoption laws. Additionally, resistance is also embodied in their attempts to reclaim their subjectivities by resisting the ideology that constructed them as objects and by appropriating a place as subjects in the dominant adoption discourse.

In Chapter Two, I presented a historical overview of adoption practices in Korea, situating the return and resettlement of adoptees in their country of birth as part of the larger history of Korean adoption. Starting with adoption practices among Korean elites during the mid- and late Chosŏn dynasty, this chapter explored the shifts of adoption, family law, and social

welfare policies. This chapter also examined shifts in adoption through the Korean War, postwar period, Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan regimes, 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, and into the present. As demonstrated, power assumed multiple forms throughout the history of overseas Korean adoption. During the inception of overseas adoption practices, members of Korean society were subjected to “biopower,” as the government was able to determine who was to be removed from Korean society as a cost-saving alternative to supporting an effective social welfare system. Under the authoritarian regimes of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan, the state aimed to regulate the population and increase economic productivity through family planning campaigns and policies, exercising control over women’s bodies. Power continues to lie in institutions that produce citizens with “docile bodies,” such as current laws that control women’s sexuality and reproductive rights, and laws that discriminate against unwed mothers.

In Section II, I situated the return of Korean adoptees to their country of birth within the history of overseas Korean adoption, discussing how a government campaign facilitated the return of adult adoptees to Korea. This included a discussion of the F-4 visa and dual citizenship campaign within the context of the Korean government’s *segzehwa* project. This chapter illustrated some ways in which these adoptees resist and reproduce systems of power. On a collective level, I argued that this act of return, to a place from where adoptees were adopted away in previous decades, signifies an act of resistance against existing systems of power. The overall act of return to a place that sent thousands of Korean children overseas as an alternative to establishing a cohesive social welfare system entails resistance. I also explored everyday modes of consumption and ordinary forms of resistance that adoptees practice in their country of birth. Some examples included cross-cultural or linguistic code switching and studying the Korean language. Through the theoretical framework of Michel de Certeau, I demonstrated how

adoptees practiced everyday resistance and tactics in ordinary activities to used imposed systems to their own ends.

Chapter Three presented the diverse experiences of adult Korean adoptees who have been affected by original family search, including those who have reunited, those who have not, and those who have made the conscious decision not to search. What I consider to be the most ethnography-heavy chapter of this dissertation, I shared a number of stories and experiences that provide a glimpse into the complex world of original family search and reunion. I began by outlining the history of Korean-led post adoption services, exploring specific mechanisms of power in the adoption industry in order to understand the ways in which power and resistance interact at the site of original family search. In framing overseas Korean adoption as an industry and system of power that has reaped monetary benefits off the separation of families, I described methods adoptees have employed to undermine this power: through searches, reunions, and adoptee rights advocacy work. This chapter also discussed the current debate over adoptees' access to their adoption files, which often contain identifying information of their original parents. From the perspective of the adoption agencies, the adoption files are the property of the agencies, and their intention is to protect the confidentiality and best interests of the parents of origin by not disclosing identifying information to the adoptee. On the opposing side, a significant number of Korean adoptees and allies interpret access to their personal identities and family histories as a human and civil right. Access to their adoption records also means knowledge into their Korean parents' physical and mental healthy histories, information that could potentially save lives.

This chapter also investigated the limitations of KAS in their attempts to reunite adoptees with their families of origin. These limitations are due to KAS's inexperience with original

family search, a shortage of trained staff, and a lack of accountability in upholding Special Adoption Law revisions. As an alternative to the search efforts of KAS and adoption agencies, I explored G.O.A.'L's birth family search department, paying close attention to its annual First Trip Home program as a form of resistance practice. Since the inception of its Birth Family Search department, G.O.A.'L has utilized creative and innovative methods in order to reestablish the physical and emotional ties between adoptees and their families of origin. Where the efforts of KAS and the adoption agencies have proven insufficient, G.O.A.'L has taken on the challenging task of reuniting thousands of adoptees and original family members despite limited staffing and a low budget. Lastly, I looked at some reunion and post reunion experiences of adoptees and their families of origin while also discussing scenarios in which adoptees have not achieved reunited.

In Chapter Four, I presented some of the politicized, organized sites of resistance among adoptee returnees in Korea. First introduced at the beginning of this dissertation, I revisited the coalition that has formed among adult adoptee returnees, unwed and single mothers, original Korean family members who have been separated from a child or children through Korean adoption practice, a Korean pastor and his wife who run an adoptee guesthouse in Seoul, and other allies. One of my main points of inquiry was why this coalition has sought alternatives to adoption while pushing for significant reforms in Korean adoption practices. To address this question, I began by investigating the shifting discourse on unwed motherhood and the significant revisions of Korea's Special Adoption Law drafted and submitted by this coalition. These revisions intended to bring greater legal rights to unwed mother and single parent families in Korea while critiquing the government's prioritization of domestic adoption over family preservation. I shared the stories of unwed, single, and original mothers and their strategy to

combine factual statistics of single mother families with their personal experiences in order to disrupt the stigma of unwed and single mothers in Korea.

Yet the enactment of these revisions prompted a backlash from pro-adoption supporters, such as Mission to Promote Adoption in Korea (MPAK). This side argues that Special Adoption Law revisions have led to a dramatic increase in child abandonments due to the fears of young, unwed mothers that formally registering the births of their children will lead to future discrimination and hardships. In order to prevent infanticide or abandonment on the streets, a Korean pastor created a “baby box” that would allow unwed mothers and other family members to anonymously abandon children. Through a reading of *The Drop Box*, a documentary film that highlights the story of Korean Pastor Lee Jong-rak who built the original baby box in Seoul, I presented the contentious debates around Special Adoption Law revisions and the baby Box. Lastly, this chapter closed with the story of Pastor Hae-sung Kim of Global Sarang, a pastor who announced his plans to open a second baby box to accommodate single mothers of foreign nationalities. His decision to abandon these plans after an eye-opening meeting he had with adult adoptees and Pastor Kim of KoRoot, demonstrates the potential of adoptee mobilization and resistance to successfully disrupt the pro-adoption discourse.

This dissertation aimed to investigate not only those adoptees who engage in advocacy work and activism, but also those who have chosen not to participate in adoptee activism or events held by adoptee organizations. During my time in Korea, I randomly came across adoptees who were unaware that a population of other adoptee returnees existed in Korea. I met many who had no interest in the political side of the adoption discourse, having fully immersed themselves into Korean society where they worked, studied, or married a Korean spouse. There were even others who, even though adopted overseas as infants or small children, do not identify



as adoptees. This diverse spectrum of individuals is what initially drew me to my dissertation topic, and it is what compelled me to learn and share their rich stories.

In returning to the article I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, what distinguished this article from others I have read about Korean adoptee returnees was its attempt—successfully and unsuccessfully depending on the opinion of those featured in this article whom I asked—to encapsulate the diverse, multiple, and complex experiences of adult adoptees in Korea and, albeit not comprehensively, elucidate the motivations behind adoptee activism and the figure of angry, ungrateful adoptee. As some of my interview participants shared with me, this label is often used to dismiss the views of adult adoptees who engage in adoptee-related activism are vocal in their criticism of adoption practices. Moreover, it is easy for these critics to attribute this anger or ungratefulness to an adoptee’s negative life experiences; this could at least explain why a population of Korean adopted adults is returning to their country of birth to dismantle the very system that produced their subjectivities as adoptees—a system that, for not all but many, provided them with love, families, and a wealth of opportunities. Also on this side of the argument, had these adoptees not been adopted, they would not be able to lead these transnational lives of privilege as adults, learning both their mother tongue and adoptive language and engaging in work that is meaningful to them. Yet, for every adoptee whose life improved materially and economically because of his or her adoption, there is another adoptee who was adopted into a situation where verbal or physical abuse was the daily norm. Moreover, returning to the motherland is not necessarily a luxury, as 16% of all Korean American adoptees were never formally naturalized as U.S. citizens as children, some of whom have been

involuntarily deported to Korea as adults for committing misdemeanors.<sup>157</sup> There is currently an adoptee citizenship movement in the United States to retroactively grant these adoptees citizenship, protecting them from deportation to their country of birth.

One of my main goals in writing this dissertation was to dispel the myth that only adoptees who are ungrateful, due to negative experiences in their adoptive countries, are the ones who are critical—critical of a system that continues to separate unwed and single mothers from their children; angry over how a postwar practice transformed into a multi-billion dollar industry, reaping the financial benefits of familial separation among the poor and vulnerable; and proactive about disrupting the conversation and advancing the case for a more socially just world. I, for one, had positive childhood experiences and continue to have a close relationship with my two adoptive parents throughout my adulthood. They have supported me in my endeavors to research issues related to overseas adoption practices, study Korean, connect with my roots, and cultivate a relationship with my Korean family. Moreover, they are aware of my critical stance toward the institution of overseas Korean adoption and involvement with the activist community, and yet this does not conflict with our relationship that was created through this same institution. As an individual whose life has been profoundly impacted by adoption, adoption to me has meant separation, creation, loss, rediscovery, reconciliation, and growth. While I was not able to cover the full breadth of issues related to overseas Korean adoption, I hope that I was able to present a more holistic portrait of the lives of adult adoptee returnees in Korea that reflects tremendous adaptation, disappointment, and achievement, while also acknowledging ambivalence, power, and resistance.

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<sup>157</sup> Alyssa Jeong Perry, “Korean adoptee in immigration battle fights to remain in his country — the US,” *The Guardian*, April 3, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/apr/03/adam-crapser-deportation-korean-adoption-system-immigration>.

## Personal Reflection

It was a chilly afternoon in mid-December of last year. Glistening snowflakes fell from the sky as we walked through a heavily wooded area toward a small mound of soil covered by thousands of pine needles and leaves. “I think this is it,” said the local *ijangnim* (village chief) in Korean with a thick Gyeongsang dialect, “but I’m not positive because this is a public burial ground. Just know that everyone becomes part of the earth and nature when they die. Your mother’s spirit is all around us.” After eight frustrating years of searching for my Korean mother, my mind suddenly went blank as I stared at what may or may not be my mother’s burial site. “*Omma, anyeong,*” was all I could say as tears streamed down my face.

I was born in Andong in 1983, adopted to Massachusetts at three months old and returned to Korea in 2005. Three months into my stay, I decided to search for my Korean family, mainly because I wanted to thank my mother for giving me life and absolve her from any guilt she may have. When I first visited the Holt International Children’s Services to initiate a birth family search, the social worker scanned my file, looked me square in the eye and told me there wasn’t any information about my birth parents. “Kim Mee Sook,” I sounded out loud as my eyes fixated on three Hangeul syllable blocks that were written on the paper in front of my social worker.

**입양인이 가족을 찾습니다**

- **한국이름:** 김미나 (미국)
- **생년월일:** 1983년 9월 8일
- **출생지:** 안동성소병원저

**신금옥 (외할머니) 1930년~1999년**  
**김태규 (외삼촌) 1949년~1994년**

**김미숙(어머니) 1960년~1988년**

저는 친아버지에 대해서 아는 것이 없습니다. 저희 어머니(김미숙)를 1982년도 경에, 안동에 있는 절에서 만났었다는 것이 전부입니다. 저희 어머니 혹은 친아버지, 저희 가족에 대해서 아시는 분은 아주 사소한 것이라도 좋으니, 꼭 연락 주시면 감사하겠습니다.

**\*\*해외입양인 김미나의 친가족 혹은 정보에 대해 시는 분은 김현진: (010) 4940-xxx / 서지은: (010) 5056-xxxx 로 연락 바랍니다.**

Image 5.1: The search flyer I created and used during my second search in 2013

“This information is confidential,” she snapped and quickly closed the file.

Sadly, I know that I am not the only one who has been denied access to my adoption records. One of my closest friends has been relentlessly searching for 13 years. Her social worker admits that her adoption file contains the information of three different children but refuses to hand over the file to my friend. After three false reunions and five negative DNA tests, my friend continues to plead for her adoption records and search for her birth family. There are countless other stories like ours. For Korean adoptees, birth family searches can be filled with multiple challenges. Some searches may take just a few weeks before adoptees and birth families are reunited, while others may span decades and yield few answers. A lack of information, restricted access to adoption records, incorrect information, falsified records, language barriers and the physical distance to Korea are some of the obstacles that hinder the reunion process.

In recent years, adoptees have begun a fight for access to their information. Just last week, a Korean law professor presented law revisions he plans to submit to the government that would in effect shut these efforts down. The revisions would allow biological parents to establish a one-time block so their children cannot access their birth records until the parents are deceased. The purpose behind this proposal is to protect the rights of the birth parents, particularly those of unwed mothers. However, the effect is that our rights are pitted against those of our own mothers and families. I also wonder if the birth mothers who choose the block, who may be in an emotionally vulnerable state at the time, will feel very differently about this decision later in life. I know of numerous birth mothers who are overjoyed to be reunited with their adult adopted children. For some birth parents, reunion provides an opportunity to heal from past traumas or reconcile guilt.

I am one of the “lucky” adoptees who reunited with my birth family, and yet I do not consider my reunion a success story. I was finally able to meet the ghost of my mother and

obtain some semblance of closure, but my mother's dramatic death at the age of twenty-eight remains shrouded in mystery, and I am still learning to grieve the death of the mother I never knew. Yet I acknowledge my birth family search has yielded more answers than the searches of many others. I watch friends and countless other adoptees struggle for something they may never attain. The tears I cried the day I met the ghost of my mother were of joy and sadness. But they were also tears for my fellow Korean adoptees who have struggled to reunite and for those who may live a lifetime with unanswered questions and unresolved grief.

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