Ear to Asia podcast

Title: The human cost of South Korea's era of transnational adoption

Description: Since the 1950s but peaking in the 1980s, an estimated 200,000 South Korean babies and children have been adopted into mainly white families in western nations, leaving a trail of fractured identities. Why did the South Korean government allow so many of its children to be sent permanently abroad? What have been the fates of the adoptees, some now well into middle age? And how are some adoptees working to reconnect themselves to the land and culture of their birth? South Korea social scientists Assoc Prof Eleana Kim and Dr Ryan Gustaffson examine the legacy of the transnational adoption program with host Peter Clarke. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

Voiceover:

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Peter Clarke:

Hello, I'm Peter Clarke. This is Ear to Asia.

Ryan Gustaffson:

When adoptees go to Korea, you know, it can often be an occasion to really recognize the gulf between their experiences and the lives of other Korean people.

Eleana Kim:

You see a kind of shift in South Korean discourses around adoption where there's a much stronger sense that adoption is not the just system that it should be, and that adoptees should be supported certainly to locate birth family but also to question why it is that the adoption program continues in South Korea.

Peter Clarke:

In this episode, the complex human legacy of South Korea's era of transnational adoption.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne.

When South Korea hosted the 1988 summer Olympics in Seoul, the country's institutionalised practise of international adoption suddenly became a focus of global attention and national shame. Starting in the 1950s but accelerating into later decades, the adopting out of Korean babies and young children to mainly white families in Western countries stood out for its sheer scale and has too often left a trail of pain and fractured identity.

What have been the fate of the adoptees, some now well into middle age? What social factors and policy calculus drove the South Korean government to allow more than 150,000 children, born to its own citizens, to be sent permanently beyond its borders. How to ordinary South Koreans today view this chapter in its recent history? And how are some adoptees working to reconnect themselves to the land and culture of their birth? Joining Ear to Asia to discuss the legacy of South Korean transnational adoption, a cultural anthropologist Associate Professor, Eleana Kim of the University of California, Irvine, and social theorist, Dr. Ryan Gustafsson of Asia Institute. Eleana and Ryan, welcome to Ear to Asia.

Eleana Kim:

Thank you for having me.

Ryan Gustafsson:

Thanks for having me, Peter.

Peter Clarke:

Eleana, starting with you, the very first thing I think we should do is get a sense of the scale of Korean transnational adoption. I mentioned a broad number at the beginning of the podcast, but what is the scale?

Eleana Kim:

Yeah, so the official numbers are roughly in the high 160,000 children sent from South Korea since the end of the Korean war in 1953. But in actuality, most researchers tend to cite the number of 200,000 because there are good number of children or adoptions that were not documented by the South Korean government. So comparing numbers in receiving nations with those that the South Korean government has, there's some important discrepancies. So a lot of researchers now cite the 200,000 children.

Peter Clarke:

Straight away you are mentioning undocumented children. That points to both a formality and perhaps an informality in the whole operation of transnational adoption.

Eleana Kim:

Yes, for sure. And certainly in the early years, in the 1950s, there were many children who were moving across national borders without proper documentation, but even into the 1970s and '80s, there are children who did go through proper channels, but may not have been included in the numbers that we see in immigration rules for instance. And sort of related to that problem is the fact that you have some adoptees who were sent to the US who were in fact, or are in fact, undocumented because they never received citizenship to the United States. And as a consequence, some of them have actually been deported back to South Korea. So you can see how adoption seems like a family matter, but it ends up being very much implicated with immigration policies, immigration legislation, and many other complicated international legal matters.

Peter Clarke:

Ryan, let's go straight to the idea of how this actually started. As I alluded to the war in South Korea and visiting military.

Ryan Gustafsson:

The practise of Korean adoption began in the aftermath of the war. There were, I think, important precursors to the emergence of the practise that's been documented by SooJin Pate. So the ways in which there were orphanages funded by Western charitable organisations even prior to the end of the war. So there's an important history, again, leading up to the official start, I suppose, of the practise. Yeah, the first wave, I guess, of Korean adoptions were predominantly of mixed race children who were born to Korean women and US or European military personnel. But come, I believe it's the mid '70s to late '70s, the majority of adoptees were of "full Korean parentage." And then international adoption doesn't peak until the mid 1980s. So a good 30 or so years after the end of the war.

Peter Clarke:

Straight away I'd like to dig into that idea, that transition point between the mixed race children going to the United States, Europe, et cetera, and the changeover to Korean children going to various adopting families beyond the borders of South Korea. Just take us in a bit zoom in on that transition period and what was going on. Eleana?

Eleana Kim:

Yeah. I mean, I don't know if you can include this in the podcast, but there's a PhD student from Tübingen University in Germany who is just completing her dissertation on this very period. I'm very excited to see her work come into publication, Wider View, because that period, particularly in the late 1960s and into the sort of broader authoritarian period in South Korea's modern history was, as Ryan mentioned, the time at which adoptions really started to increase in number. These are really exponential increases year after year and peaking as he mentioned in the mid 1980s.

So what happened with the switch from these mixed race children who were really viewed by the South Korean government in the post-war era as a major ideological problem because of the animosity between North Korea and South Korea, so North Korea or the DPRK was framing the adoption of Korean children as the kind of end point of capitalism, right? South Korea is actually selling babies, selling human beings. But on top of that, because there were mixed race, they were viewed as a kind of very visible evidence of South Korea's occupation by the United States. So US imperialism was kind of being visibly demonstrated by the appearance of these mixed race children.

And the South Korean government under Syngman Rhee at the time really tried to push for these children to be adopted to the United States because they're reviewed as really the children of America, right? Their fathers were American soldiers and the rightful place was to be sent to American homes. The number of those children started to decline. And moreover, a lot of the mothers of those children decided to raise them on their own. So at the same time, you had an increasing number of poor families. Those children born in poverty couldn't receive government funding or subsidies if they were members of extent families because the government view was that the father, the breadwinner, in these patriarchal nuclear families held the primary responsibility for the dependents in those families.

So if you had a poor family who didn't have the means to raise their children, they couldn't look to the government for welfare. Instead, it led to a lot of child abandonment. But what abandonment meant was poor families sending children to orphanages. Sometimes for just basic education, sometimes just temporarily because they didn't have enough food to feed their children. But because of the existing channels that were put into place in the earlier post-war period, adoptions of those full Korean children who had parents who were not war orphans started to become the trend. Orphanages certainly at the time were understaffed, poorly funded, had many children that they had to care for, but one of the sort of release valves for that problem was international adoption. So that's really just part of the picture of how the shift from mixed race children to full Korean children happened.

Peter Clarke:

Eleana, we come to 1988, an inflexion point, evidently the summer Olympics in Seoul. Of course a big international media contingent arrives in Seoul to broadcast the sport obviously, but also to do those side stories, if you like, on social conditions and the society in South Korea. Stories crop up in international media. Do you remember some of those stories in the United States and how did they seem to you?

Eleana Kim:

Well, I'm not quite old enough to remember them exactly. But if you look at the archives, newspaper archives or television coverage of the Olympics at the time, certainly there was a lot of focus placed on the fact that South Korea was gaining a lot of renowned for being this sort of economic powerhouse for its rapid industrialization. And at the same time, a lot of journalists were focusing on the fact that one of its largest exports was, in fact, children. And so that quickly became a focus of international media, which also reflected obviously poorly on the South Korean government which was really trying to prove that it was a rising economic power.

That dynamic of South Korea's economic advancement and its continuing reliance on international adoption as a solution for its social welfare problems has actually not gone away. So what we see year after year are politicians questioning "Why is it that we still continue to send children overseas when we are viewed as one of the world's largest economies?" Every year this debate continues to play out. And unfortunately, the sense that South Korea is "not quite ready" to close its international adoption programme continues to be the dominant narrative.

Peter Clarke:

So Eleana, directly after that 1988 Olympic games, how did political circles, the political elite, react to that wave of critique and criticism of the transnational adoption system?

Eleana Kim:

Well, one of the immediate responses was to call for an end to adoption. There were policies put into place to try to gradually reduce the numbers of international adoptions and to encourage more domestic adoptions. The government has periodically stated particular goals, right? I think one was by 1996 there would be an end to international adoptions. The model was to, as I mentioned, increase domestic adoptions and reduce international adoptions kind of in tandem. But that 1996 goal was stymied by the Asian financial crisis which hit South Korea very hard in 1997 and 1998. So because of that, the government had to abandon that plan. And what we saw were actually many families looking to adoption agencies and to child welfare institutions like orphanages because they were completely unable to support their children. So that was a real setback in terms of trying to figure out a solution to the issue of child welfare in Korea.

There have been other periodic calls. South Korea has recovered from what was known at that time in South Korea is the IMF crisis. But even so, 2005 was another year in which there's going to be an end to international adoption. And what we've seen and what I would argue is that South Korea's international adoption programme has existed for almost the entire history of South Korea as a nation, right? So that puts South Korea in this interesting conundrum because international adoption agencies in the west, particularly in the United States, have always had a say in what South Korea does to solve its adoption issue.

So in 2005, when Korea called for an end to international adoptions, parents in Australia, parents in North America really were worried about what would happen to the children that they were expecting. Adoption agencies in particularly the US stepped up and said, "Oh no, no. South Korea's not ready to end it's overseas adoption programme." So you can see how South Korea kind of doesn't really have full autonomy in determining the fate of its own children or its own population because of the long history of this relationship between the South Korean government and overseas adoption agencies who have a real interest in keeping this programme alive.

Peter Clarke:

Yes, you're describing those institutionalised pathways, those infrastructures, not only within North America, but I'm assuming in Australia for example, and Europe. How did they evolve over that period? You've already alluded to this and pointed to it, but what role in practical terms did they play in shaping actual policy within South Korea?

Eleana Kim:

Well, I would say that this is actually a question that a lot of adoptee scholars and adoptee activists have. I don't know that we actually have evidence of the precise conversations, but we do know that these are longstanding relationships. And at least in terms of the public discourse, there's often been this, I would say paternalistic attitude, like Korea's not ready to end its overseas adoption programme. Other people would argue that the amount of foreign exchange that South Korea has earned through its adoption programmes has also been a motivating factor to continue the overseas adoption of Korean children. Of course, that number has gone down quite a bit in the past 20 years, but at least at its peak, it was certainly the case that child welfare institutions in South Korea were funded by overseas adoptions. So rather than the South Korean government funding social welfare programmes for needy children, for unwed mothers, even for disabled children, you had adoption agencies being tasked by the Korean government to run these institutions and really being forced in a lot of ways to use the revenue of overseas adoption to fund those very institutions.

So you can see how there's a kind of collusive or coercive set of relationships there. And as I mentioned, the scholar from Germany, her name is Youngeun Koo, her research is really bringing this to light in terms of the ways in which these South Korean social workers and adoption agency workers are really hamstrung in terms of what they could do. Even if they believe that continuing overseas adoption was not the right thing for South Korea as a nation or for the children, the infrastructure and the pressures from the South Korean government, in some ways, force them to expand the programme in order for them to continue to support children in their institutions. So a lot of those relationships have changed in recent years, but that history is very much part of the larger picture.

Peter Clarke:

Ryan, let's meet some of these adoptees more clearly. Going back to that Korean war period and then moving on as it evolved, what sort of families, what sort of children are we seeing in the transnational adoption system?

Ryan Gustafsson:

Yeah. So as you mentioned at the start, Korean adoptees were overwhelmingly adopted to white families, and adopted to predominantly white communities overwhelmingly in the United States and then in smaller numbers to Western European countries and Australia and Canada. So from my understanding in the early waves of adoption, as I said, yeah, children were mixed race, kids of Korean women and US, European military personnel. My understanding is they were a little bit older as well. I think that on top of the conversation of what we've just been having, I think the demand from Western receiving countries has been for younger children or infants. The sort of the younger, the better. And I think that also kind of reflects pervasive understandings of childhood and racialized childhood as well.

I don't know the precise time period in which this happened, but large numbers of Korean girls were being sent overseas. At a certain point, that changed. So that boys were more likely to be sent overseas. The larger proportion of adoptees were boys, which creates perhaps interesting gender differences to sort of look into now when thinking about the different experiences among Korean adoptees. So I would say those are kind of the main sort of broad strokes.

Peter Clarke:

Am I wrong in imagining then during the South Korean war period that some babies born out of wedlock to military from the United States or elsewhere, the single mother may have been from a quite well off family? Is that right? Eleana, do you have any insight on that?

Eleana Kim:

I think there's so little that we know about birth mothers. We can speculate, but part of the consensus is that birth mothers during that period were very diverse because you had women who were working. This was a period of mass urbanisation in South Korea so you had a lot of young women moving to Seoul or other cities for the first time being apart from their families and becoming pregnant for various reasons and out of wedlock. And then you also had poor families in which the parents might have been married, had children that they were raising and then another child that was sent for adoption for various reasons. We know from adoptee birth family searches that in a lot of instances, it wasn't actually the birth parents or the birth mother who made the decision to send the child for adoption. Sometimes it was a stepmother, sometimes it was a grandparent, sometimes it was an aunt or uncle. So there's a lot of diversity in terms of both who birth parents were and who was making the decision for adoption. But as far as well-off women as birth parents, that's highly possible.

We also know that even though abortion in South Korea has been widely accessible, it's also been illegal in most instances. So you have a confusing social and cultural scenario in which abortions are very easy to access for some and yet are criminalised in most instances.

Peter Clarke:

How deliberate a policy was it for the South Korean government during this period we're discussing?

Eleana Kim:

I would say that each regime had its take on adoption. And so, as I mentioned under the Syngman Rhee regime, and this is more in the postwar period when it was mostly mixed race children, the idea was they belong in their father's countries. And then under the Park Chung-hee regime, there was at first a notion that adoption should be curtailed and that South Korean should be able to take care of their own children. And he, in fact, instituted a programme in which government workers were supposed to foster and adopt orphans. There was also an attempt to de-institutionalise orphanages and bring more children who were known to have parents to return them to their homes. But the policy under Park Chung-hee, he was in power for 18 years so it was a very long time, but it gradually shifted to sort of an acceptance that adoption was kind of the most expedient way to deal with these social welfare issues.

And then under the Chun Doo-hwan regime starting in the 1980s, it was really encouraged, like all restrictions on international adoption were lifted. It was just a period of expansion, which is exactly why we see the peak number of adoptions reaching almost 9,000 in one year in 1985 during the Chun Doo-hwan regime. So it was in 1988, towards the end of the 1980s, where you see this kind of criticism because adoptions had been pretty much unregulated and the pullback in the 1990s is a direct response to that kind of international criticism.

But what's interesting is that, at the same time you have many... If we consider at that point maybe let's say over a hundred thousand, close to 150,000 children have adopted to North America and Europe and Australia, you also had many thousands of parents saying, "Korean adoption's great. Why would you end adoption? It allowed us to raise children, to have a family, to expand our families." Adoption of Korean children had a very positive reputation in terms of the programme itself, which was considered to be very efficient, very above board, very ethical. I know some people have a problem with this characterization, but it was actually called the Cadillac of adoption programmes because of the, I mean, I hate to put it this way, but really the high quality of the children who were considered to be very healthy and the smooth running of a system that had really been perfected over around three decades by that point.

Peter Clarke:

You seem to be describing a kind of commodification.

Eleana Kim:

Yes. And this is exactly why you can see that international journalists in 1988 were saying, "What is happening here exactly?" And you know, at the level of parents and the individual, of course people have really benefited from Korean adoption. But when you pull back and look at the larger picture and start to see the scale of movement of these children, then it really does start to raise eyebrows and raise questions.

Peter Clarke:

Ryan, let's start delving into the cultural dimensions of this. We've touched on broadly the economic and perhaps developmental factors within South Korea. But I think looking in the shadows are these deeper cultural dimensions and forces at work, and I think Eleana's already touched hoon it briefly, the patriarchal, that was the term she used, but the patrilineal blood culture and I guess the vestigial confusion ideology within South Korea. So how powerfully does that patrilineal cultural dimension drive transnational adoption within South Korea?

Ryan Gustafsson:

Obviously cultural and sociocultural factors are not the sort of defining factor or the determining factor, but I would say they definitely played a role as well. One of the, I suppose, clear ways that that can be gleaned is in the family registry system which up until 2008 was patrilineal. And so as a child, we needed to be placed on the father's family registry to be granted recognition by the state. This put single mothers obviously in very difficult situations whereby their children could not be recognised as belonging to them. My understanding is that within Korean society, that is a radical diminishing of their life chances and the viability of them having a meaningful life within which they could flourish.

So what is known as the orphan family registry or the orphan hojeog has been, I think, a really key legal mechanism through which the adoption process could be very efficiently facilitated. I would also say that the orphan hojeog or the orphan family registry also created... From the sort of side of immigration law and also from Western receiving countries, this provided an orphan which was often an orphan on paper only. It's been termed the sort of legal fiction of orphanhood, variously termed sort of paper hojeog or paper orphanhood, whereby children who indeed have living parents were legally constructed to be orphans. This was a sort of legal precondition for rendering them adoptable.

So as part of this story is of course the slippage between orphan and adoptee. And I suppose from adoptee's points of view then, when they grow up and start to question or think about their histories, this is a pretty big thing to sort of wrap your head around, this idea that one wasn't necessarily an orphan. I think researcher, Jodi Kim has called this the paradox of the Orphan with Two Mothers. I think this is one of also the legacies on a subjective level of the way that Korean adoption has been facilitated.

Peter Clarke:

You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. Just a reminder to the listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its societies, politics and cultures, it's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others. Plus, you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. I'm Peter Clarke and I'm joined by career transnational adoption researchers, Dr. Ryan Gustafsson and associate professor, Eleana Kim.

Ryan, I think it's time, picking up on your earlier queue, to look at the experiences of the adoptees themselves. I understand that the research in this area has gone through different stages, but it is intensifying and we do seem to have more information now. Give us the broad contours as you understand it, drawing upon your own personal experience, what it meant and what it means now to grow up in, say, in North American and European adopted families. I must say scanning some of the international organisations that adoptees have formed, the thing that jumps out at me are the Anglo names or the related European names like yours. That's just one aspect of it. So what do we know? What are the broad contours of what we're discovering about the experiences of adoptees?

Ryan Gustafsson:

Yeah, that's a really big question. I suppose I would, I guess, start by saying that a lot of the earlier research was more in the fields of social work and psychology child development and I think that reflected one that adoptees themselves weren't involved in the research process because of perhaps with the stages of adoption and how old they were at that point, but it also reflects, I think, the preoccupations of researchers at the time which is really about sort of child adjustment and welfare, which of course is important, but there has been less, historically at least, less of an interest in what happens when those children grow up. So it seems to have been focused much more on the sort of immediate adjustment of adoptee children.

And then since the early to mid 2000s, there's been a lot more research done on the more sociopolitical aspects of adoption as a phenomenon, but also on the lived experiences of adoptees. And so I think that research has been asking questions relating more to race and racism, ethnic identity, how adoptees as adults reflect on their experiences. So there's been, I guess in the scholarly work, interesting shifts over the last few decades. And now there are more adoptees that are doing research themselves. There's been since the late 1990s sort of proliferation of Korean adoptee groups.

At least in so far as their connection to Korea specifically, I should say that I think it was like 1986, the first Korean adoptee group was formed in Sweden. So adult adoptees have sort of been coming together for a while now, but I think it's the late '90s, early 2000s where adult adoptee groups are really starting to really come together globally, aided in part by the internet and able to form networks and communities and knowledge sharing that have really advanced the sorts of questions that are being asked about Korean adoption as a legacy and also Korean adoptee experiences and also informing some of the more kind of, I suppose, scholarly agendas as well.

Peter Clarke:

Eleana, give us a sense. I'm just exercising my imagination here. Give us a sense of the actual experience of perhaps a group or individual adoptees in the United States. As I mentioned to Ryan earlier, I guess most of them, or perhaps even all of them, with an Anglo or Euro related name, but of course with Korean appearance. Are we right in imagining that fitting into that broader category of the migrant experience or are there distinct differences from your point of view?

Eleana Kim:

I want to preface by just saying I'm not adopted myself, but when I did my research starting in 1999, one of my first field sites as an ethnographer was the international gathering of Korean adoptees, adult Korean adoptees, which took place in Washington DC. It brought together 400 Korean adoptees at a hotel conference. The adoptees I met there were just astounded at the sheer numbers of others like them who, as you say, had these Anglo names.

So the conference organisers had published a kind of Facebook, sorry, not Facebook as we know it today, of analogue brochure where they had asked attendees to submit a headshot and then any information they had about themselves. It became an incredible archive for people who attended

that conference because they saw immediately the common experience that they had despite all the diversity in where they ended up, which state in the United States. It was also some people came from Europe. No matter what kind of neighbourhood they grew up in or how old they were, they all experienced that essential displacement, which was reflected in that visible discrepancy between their appearance as an Asian looking person with a name that "didn't fit."

So certainly I think that sort of encapsulated the brute fact of their displacement as children moving from one country, one set of relationships to another. And of course, what each of them made of that fact is incredibly diverse. Even at that conference in 1999, it spanned age ranges from people in their middle aged to people in their early 20s. I think we see this in the discussion we're having now. Because Korean adoption has spent over 70 years, it's actually very hard to talk about it in a sort of general way and also because it has included over 200,000 adopted Koreans, but also potentially a million or more other people who've been involved in it, whether birth family, adoptive family, social workers, et cetera. It's a really large group of people over an extended period of time and there have been many historical political social shifts within that. But then you have the incredible diversity of adoptees themselves.

So when I started my research, I think there was a real hunger among adoptees to figure out who they were on an individual basis, but also who they were as a collective. There's more research and there's more narration of adoptee experience through various artistic forms. And all of it is kind of helping us to gain a broader picture, but in many ways it's still very hard to generalise because of the sheer numbers of people that we're talking about.

Peter Clarke:

Ryan, we just heard Eleana use the word hunger. I think the word hunger applies right across the whole literature and the whole culture of people who do find themselves as adoptees in whatever context. But here we have that hunger to know about one's biological roots. "Where do I come from biologically?" It's a double whammy here, isn't it? That we've also got the cultural aspect. "Am I Korean? Am I Western? Am I American? Am I Australian?" So could we examine through your eyes those two aspects? The hunger for additional biological knowledge. "Who am I really? What are my genes even?" And what about the cultural dimension as well? Could we start the journey into examining those two dimensions?

Ryan Gustafsson:

I suppose one of the things that I would start with is this emphasis on biology or "my biological roots" and so on and so forth. That is the language that is often used, but I think it's very difficult to extricate from a social history. Just going back to what we're discussing earlier about orphanhood for instance, what does it mean to say "I have an interest in my biological past or my biological family members" when sort of, I suppose, chasing knowledge around "biology" is really about unearthing a social history?

So I guess I just want to preface my answer by saying that this emphasis on like DNA testing for example, it doesn't reflect a simple biological essentialism or whatever terminology we would like to use for that. I think it's really, as you say, a hunger or a chasing after trying to understand, as we've been discussing, a really longstanding social and historical phenomenon and how could this happen that one ends up in a Western country with a Western name, but is Korean by ethnicity. For some adoptees, has a Korean name on their files who are you named by. In many cases, one will never know. In my case, I know that I was named by a social worker and it has nothing to do really with my Korean parents.

And so again, I think when you start asking questions about your past, what I've learned is that it just creates more and more questions. It's very, very difficult to come to "answers" that feel like answers, that feel like they don't just simply lead on to further lines of inquiry. I think that the sort of

transracial element of Korean adoption and the cultural aspect that you speak of is another really important dimension to focus on. I was really struck within the last few years, for example, speaking to adoptees who have said that in light of the COVID pandemic and the resurgence of anti-Asian racism, that they've felt they've had to really confront their being adopted in ways that they hadn't so much before. I guess also tied to the more cultural side of things, a lot of adoptees I've spoken to have also said that now when they've been unable to go to Korea because of the pandemic and travel restrictions, that has increased their desire even more. And so Korea's the first place they want to go to when they're able to book a ticket.

So I think that the questions around family history and the cultural dimensions as well are things that I would say can be very long running questions that adoptees face because I think ultimately it has to do with one's identity and it also has to do with finding a sense of belonging. And of course, that is not something that issues just from the individual self, but that's something that's highly dependent on one's social context, which of course shifts.

Peter Clarke:

Eleana, how do you, in the United States, observe the existence and at times intense experience of prejudice, anti-Asian racism? How do they modulate? How do they shape the individual experiences, do you believe, of the adoptees?

Eleana Kim:

I would echo what Ryan just said regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of anti-Asian racism. But even before then in the United States, when Donald Trump was elected as president on a racist recidivist platform that was anti-immigrant and pretty explicitly white supremacist, there were adoptees who suddenly started to view themselves as immigrants. This was a relatively new realisation because for so long, many adoptees had been told or had framed themselves as exceptional migrants and not as immigrants in the ways that we often think about them in the United States because they came to be a part of mostly white middle class families. And yet just from conversations with other scholars and looking at Facebook feeds, there was an increasingly discernible discourse around adoptees both identifying with immigrants, particularly people of colour immigrants, but also having very difficult conversations with their white adoptive parents about their status as non-white members of their families.

So I think that this is very much an evolving set of conversations. All of that became ever more heightened with the COVID-19 pandemic and the anti-Asian racism, and really reached a peak with the murders in Atlanta of the Asian women who are gunned down by a white killer basically. So all of this has kind of happened in rapid succession. I think that it would be very interesting to follow through on how adoptees are continuing to think about their belonging in the United States or in other settler colonial or immigrant receiving nations because the conversation about race and racism has shifted quite a bit.

Peter Clarke:

Ryan, my spouse happens to be a Russian, born in Australia, speaks fluent Russian. And when we travel and bump into Russians, either in Russia itself or around Europe, there's always a very warm welcome, lots of hugs and statements like, "You are part of our family." It's very warm and very enthusiastic, but I'm guessing that when some adoptees make that journey across the bridge back into Korean culture, there may not be quite as warm or welcome. Am I correct?

Ryan Gustafsson:

Well, I suppose there's a lot to unpack there. I think that when adoptees go to Korea, they're often confronted by their difference and numerable differences, as well as by this feeling of looking like

other people perhaps for the first time in their lives. And that's quite a transformative experience for a lot of adoptees. But I think that it's complicated, I think that not being able to speak the language and from my understanding like language capacity and the ability to embody cultural norms, I think is such a key part of what it means to look like and be accepted in an ethnic community. And so I think it can often be an occasion for adoptees to really recognise the gulf between their experiences and the lives of other Korean people. And that can be something that's quite difficult to navigate and make peace with. Yeah, I would say that it's complicated.

I guess from anecdotes that I've heard, the Korean response to adoptees when they meet them is also another occasion for adoptees to feel a little bit uncomfortable for instance when they're met with pity or regret by Korean nationals who say that they're really ashamed of what their government has done, or among younger Koreans, a sense of that adoptee should be grateful and consider themselves lucky that they were educated in the west and that they can speak fluent English because of the social capital material ways in which that has benefited the adoptee. Yeah, all that to say, I think it's complicated. I think that warm welcome may be a bit of a fantasy that some adoptees have. And I think it makes sense that we would have that fantasy. I think it's very much a fantasy that's short lived though once the adoptee goes to Korea.

Peter Clarke:

What's your take on this, Eleana, and your observation, and I'm particularly interested just to investigate further the intergenerational aspect of this, the children of adoptees. You mentioned some of the older adoptees in middle aged now, and perhaps some of them have married each other and had children. They're caught up in this dynamic as well. What's your observation of that, going back into the Korean culture and those many questions around identity and that fantasy that Ryan just talked about of a warm welcome back in the home culture?

Eleana Kim:

Yeah, I concur with everything that Ryan described, but just add that such a big part of how adoptee's experience Korea now has to do with the really important contributions that some of the first returning adoptees made in terms of establishing a kind of home base for returning adoptees. So in the early to mid 1990s, adoptees were going back to Korea in increasingly large numbers, but discovering that they were lost and they experienced this sort of second type of displacement where they looked like others, but couldn't speak Korean or found it very hard to navigate. And what I found is that a lot of adoptees, precisely because of the 1988 summer Olympic games, suddenly started to think about Korea as a place that they could go to, right? So they saw it on their televisions that looked modern and advanced and so they wanted to go.

And by the 1990s, there was a very expansive market for English language teaching. So many college graduates in the United States, for instance, could go to South Korea to teach English, earn lots of money and experience Korea, and adoptees were among them. They saw this as an opportunity to visit their birth country and take advantage of these kinds of new circuits of globalisation. But they were different than, say, their white peers who were doing the same thing. Because they had been born in Korea, they had questions, but they weren't like Korean Americans who were going because they didn't have any familial relationships that they could tap into.

So these returning adoptees in the early 1990s started to form these collectives. One of the organisations is GOAL, Global Overseas Adoptees' Link. So that was really formed as... It was imagined as a kind of home base for returning adoptees. And now you have a range of other adoptee-founded and adoptee-led organisations that provide this kind of network and spaces for adoptees to meet each other to gain access to resources and things like that. And there's a whole other set of stories that could be told about those returning adoptees and how they've intervened

into South Korean society, culturally, socially, but even legally in terms of pushing South Korean legislators and politicians to reform family law and adoption law.

Ryan Gustafsson:

I was just going to add that in that shift whereby adult adoptees were forming groups such as GOAL being a really key one, I think there's also been this gradual shift away from reliance on adoption agencies for trips to Korea. I believe the first "motherland" programme was run by an adoption agency all the way back in 1975 as a trial, and then it took off. And you see... I think Eleana has called this adoptee tourism whereby there's a whole industry built around adult adoptees returning or maybe even teen adoptees. And from GOAL onwards, I think you start to see adult adoptees trying to find ways to support other Korean adoptees abroad to return to Korea in ways that don't rely on adoption agencies with whom a lot of adoptees have sort of very ambivalent, I think, and rightly so ambivalent feelings toward. And I think that's also an interesting part of that shift post say the late '90s.

Peter Clarke:

Eleana, is it possible now in 2022, as we have this conversation, to objectively assess whether there's been a net benefit or a net negative to the nation of South Korea, to the culture of South Korea, to the polity of South Korea? Positive, negative net.

Eleana Kim:

I think phrasing the question as one of sort of cost benefit analysis in a way encourages us to sort of think about adoptees as commodities. And this is the critique by many adoptees, is that their own adoptions helped South Korea's economic rise precisely because South Korea's social welfare burdens had been exported. And I think it's impossible to kind of reduce all of this complexity to a question of numbers to answer whether it was a net benefit or not. But I do think that because it did involve the commodification of children and social relations, then that critique is widely shared. There's a framework among critical adoption studies scholars, most of whom study Korean adoption, many of whom were adopted from Korea. And that's the framework of the transnational adoption industrial complex, which would argue that in fact South Korea did benefit from overseas adoption economically and politically, particularly in the 1980s because adoptees were framed by the South Korean government as cultural ambassadors who could bridge the east and the west or South Korea and the west in a kind of people to people diplomacy.

So there is that discourse that one can draw upon. But objectively, I don't know. I think that a lot of adoptees would argue that their experience of adoption is full of gains and losses and that they don't add up or you can't calculate cleanly, whether it was good or bad. I think that they would say that they exist in that sort of grey area, but for so long, the adoptive parent and adoption agency dominated discourses insisted that adoption was always good. And that I think is the discourse that adult adoptees have been pushing back against. Some would argue that it's always bad, but others would say it's an impossible mix that can't be fully parsed as net good or net bad. And I think this is what you see in a lot of the adoptee-produced artwork and novels and other kinds of cultural production.

Peter Clarke:

Ryan?

Ryan Gustafsson:

Yeah. I would just say taking that to, I suppose, a more subjective level, I was really taken by something that Eleana's written on this. She calls it profound incommensurability. I think

incommensurability is a really, really interesting concept kind of used to tease out precisely this inability to find a common standard of measure with which one could determine losses and gains or good and bad. And that on a subjective level, I think that adoptees and myself included, it's just trying to hold both and trying to give it the space that such complexity kind of demands. I would also say that pushing against the narrative of adoption is always being good, and as adoptees as being saved from an unlivable life, I think that those are the dominating discourses that I would say as a researcher, but also as an adoptee, that that is the predominant narrative that I think does need to be pushed against it.

Peter Clarke:

Ryan, we've ranged over quite a lot of history and the complexity of the transnational adoption system from South Korea, but what do we see today within civil society in South Korea, the activists, the critics, the supporters of the system? What is the state of play? What is the state of the discourse?

Ryan Gustafsson:

There's been a push among Korean overseas adoptee activists, I should say, within Korea to form alliances and build solidarity with domestic adoptee groups in Korea, which I think is obviously an exciting development and important bridge to be made and exploring ways in which overseas adoptees could support domestic adoptee efforts. There is also a push and I think a really important and exciting one for the Korean government to transfer all responsibility and oversight of overseas adoption to the Korean government and taking that away from adoption agencies in Korea. A lot of adoptees see this as a really important step toward increasing accountability for current and historic adoptions. I don't really know the precise ins and outs of the history, but there's been a longstanding critique that Korean oversees adoptions have never been public, that agencies have been partially, or if not, fully funded privately, and that deprivatizing it is a really important step forward toward instituting, I guess, mechanisms that can be more accountable, can allow adoptees more access to their records.

And so that's one of the important steps that's being taken in Korea right now. So I think it's an interesting and important time that we're in to sort of see where Korean adoption practises, but also discourses in Korea is going to go.

Peter Clarke:

Eleana, from deeper in Korean history via the war in South Korea and to the present day, the narrative arc around transnational adoptions is quite an arc, quite a trajectory. What's your final snapshot? Give us a sense of perhaps that deeper history, but where we are at today.

Eleana Kim:

Thanks for that opportunity because I was just thinking that one piece that wasn't brought up yet was the fact that South Korea has one of the lowest, if not the lowest birth rates in the world. And that's been the case for some time now. And yet it still sends roughly 180 children overseas for adoption. So that contradiction, which I noted when I was doing my field work 20 years ago, roughly, is interesting, right? South Korea's great economic successes have led to a new demographic crisis, and yet adoption continues. So that particular configuration of contradictions is something that adoptees confront when they come to South Korea. So going back to this question about losses and gains and incommensurabilities, what I've noted is for adoptees, who might say, "I'm very happy to have been adopted. I love my parents. I like my life. I like who I am." Nevertheless, when they go to Korea, it's very hard to not confront those contradictions and to question them.

And so I think where we are at now is that South Korea continues to have this below replacement population issue, an incredibly low birth rate, and still has yet to figure out how to best support women who have children who are not married, who may want to raise their children. And for some time now, because the government focus has been on domestic adoption as the solution to international adoption rather than family preservation as the solution, what you've seen is adoptive parents in South Korea being granted more money to incentivize them to adopt children than is being offered to unwed mothers who would otherwise want to raise their children as single mothers.

So again, another contradiction that I think adoptees have helped to bring to light adoptee activists in South Korea. I've just noted that when it comes to discussions in social media or when news articles come out in the comment sections, you see a kind of shift in South Korean discourse around adoption where there's a much stronger sense that adoption is not the just system that it should be and that adoptee should be supported, certainly to locate birth family, but also to question why it is that the adoption programme continues in South Korea. So I think we are in an interesting moment where at this point some of the work that adoptee activists have been engaged with in South Korea is going to lead to some really fundamental changes.

Peter Clarke:

I think it's right to leave us at the end of this conversation with a very strong sense of the contradictions and the complexities. Eleana, Ryan, thank you for joining us for this conversation on Ear to Asia. Thank you so much.

Ryan Gustafsson:

Thank you.

Eleana Kim:

Thank you.

Peter Clarke:

Our guests have been Associate Professor Eleana Kim of the University of California, Irvine, and Dr. Ryan Gustafsson of Asia Institute. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcasts app, Stitcher, Spotify, or Google Podcasts. Please rate and review us. It helps new listeners find the show. And put a good wording for us on social media.

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