

Reading Archives Against the Grain

My parents both lived through the Korean War, but rarely spoke of their experiences. It wasn't until I was in college and began asking them questions that their stories began to unfold. I learned that my mother lost two older sisters and her father in the war. My father spent time on US military bases where American GIs would give him chewing gum and chocolate. He found weathered copies of *Look* and *Life* magazines, and it was there, amidst the destruction of war, that his American Dream began. It was their stories that made me want to write about Koreans who had survived the war.

The Korean War took place between 1950 and 1953 and is still not technically over as an armistice ended the fighting but not the war. It claimed an estimated 34,000 American, 900,000 Chinese, and over 3 million Korean lives, the majority of whom were civilians. While the United Nations fought in Korea, the US made up 90% of all UN troops. During the war, the US dropped 635,000 tons of bombs on the peninsula which is the size of Minnesota. Entire cities were wiped off the map. These data points clarify how this war forever changed the lives of millions of people.

As a grad student, I began searching the stacks at Yale's Sterling Library to find anything I could about Korea that was published between 1945, when US commanders divided the peninsula and the US occupied south of the 38th parallel, to around the 1970s. I found US government and State Department pamphlets and booklets filled with photographs of Korean temples and Korean people that introduced American readers to Korea. I then turned to US media to see how news of the war reached American audiences. I was struck by how frequently images of and stories about Korean children appeared across multiple sources. During the war, news of children receiving donations from Americans and images of children alone amidst

rubble with captions like this one from *McCall's*—"This young girl, whose entire family may have been killed, clings desperately to all that she has left—the ruins of her home in Seoul"--communicated the desperation of Korean children.¹ Once combat ended in 1953, news arrived of Americans adopting Korean children. Stories of US servicemen formally adopting Korean children and bringing their little "charges" to the States offered glimmers of hope on the heels of a devastating and unpopular war.²

Stories like these raised questions about how the Korean child came to occupy not only American understandings about US involvement in the Korean War, but also about how Korean children actually arrived to the US as adoptees in predominantly white American households. In particular, I wanted to know how these interracial and international families came about amidst ongoing racial segregation in the United States and restrictive immigration laws that had until only recently, as of 1952, ended Asian exclusion by allowing a very limited number of visas from Asia annually.³

With the support of the Mellon Foundation and the Council on Library and Information Resources, my first stop was the National Archives in College Park, MD that houses the US Department of State, Department of Defense, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, and the US Army Records. Here, I found correspondence that added new dimensions to the stories I had been seeing in popular publications. In US Army Chaplain records I saw that visiting local orphanages to deliver donated goods and play with the children was scheduled into the daily

¹ "Warmth for the Orphans of Korea," *McCall's*, October 1953, 16–17.

² See for example, Jon Brenneis, "A New American Comes 'Home,'" *Life*, November 30, 1953.

³ The McCarran-Walter Act continued the national origins quota system at a rate of one-sixth of 1 percent of each nationality's population in the United States in 1920. While this favored those of northern and western European lineage, it limited the immigration of those from Asia. "Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952," US Department of State Office of the Historian. For seminal studies on race and immigration law in the United States, see Mai Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) and Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

activities of US servicemen. At Christmas time, American GIs dressed up as Santa Claus and delivered toys and hot chocolate. Military correspondence noted that contact with Korean children boosted the morale of soldiers and gave them purpose in the war. The memos made it clear that the visitations were developed with the soldiers in mind. For example, American Christmas traditions were entirely unfamiliar with Korean children but carried great significance for homesick men. The Department of Defense hired its own cameramen to capture these tender moments on camera, images that were then relayed to the American public.



Figure 1. US Department of Defense, “Orphanage Story,” 1952 (raw footage).

National Archives, College Park, MD.

Raw film footage shows that the DoD even tried its hand at creating short films, like this one titled “Orphanage Story.” In the film still above (Figure 1), there is a Korean boy crouched and alone on the side of the road when a US jeep rolls into the frame and stops. A US soldier steps out of the jeep to talk to the boy. The next scene shows the men bringing the boy to a local orphanage.

The documents and film reels in the state archives demonstrated that Korean children figured into regular US military activity in Korea. Korean children were also central to the Department of Defense's strategy to narrate the war as one of American rescue, a storyline that helped obscure the destruction caused by US bombs and military tactics, like destroying dams to flood entire villages or strafing Korean refugees to eliminate enemies hiding within.

The records revealed something else. American servicemen began going beyond the military-prescribed points of contact with Korean children. Men began housing Korean "mascots" in their barracks, and some tried to formally adopt the children.⁴ Unit officers kept monthly tabs on adoption requests.⁵ Commanders responded by ordering regular sweeps of the barracks and creating obstacles to prevent its men from adopting Korean children. Military officials noted that such measures were necessary to keep its men from getting too caught up in the care of children when they should have been focusing their energies on the war.

The archives also showed that the tactics used to delay requests for adoptions were similar to those used to deter US servicemen from marrying Korean women. Marriage applications that I found in this collection included character references from family, neighbors, and the local police chief, as well as medical examinations that included extensive STD screenings. The documents revealed the extent to which couples had to debunk assumptions that Korean women were prostitutes. Together, military efforts to prevent its men from bringing home Korean children and women revealed moments of fissure—when military commanders could not control the sentiment and actions of its men, when Koreans and Americans became intimately intertwined, and when war abroad threatened to become an issue of immigration at a

⁴ Letter to Commanding General Eighth United States Army in Korea (EUSAK), Frank W. Pew, William L. Carroll Jr., "Adoption of Korean Orphans," August 6, 1951, RG 338, Box 491, Folder 290, National Archives, College Park, MD.

⁵ Records for the month of May 1956, for example, total approximately twenty-five children, but there was no follow-up to indicate whether any of the adoptions were completed. RG 338, Box 645, Folder 292, National Archives, College Park, MD.

time when most states upheld antimiscegenation laws and neighborhoods across the United States remained segregated.

Postcolonial scholar Ann Laura Stoler examines the anxieties and tensions that emerge in the colonial administrative archive. She explores the “unsure and hesitant sorts of documentation and sensibilities that gathered around them.”⁶ Inspired by her methodology, I approached the US State archives planning to read what was missing as much as what was included. I read the documents not only for their intended purpose, but also against the grain. By doing so, the questions at the heart of my project shifted. To begin, the National Archives showed me that my project would not just be about adoptees in the US, but also about Korean women. I saw how directly the US military helped script the versions of war that appeared in US media, and how these narratives shielded military efforts to keep Korean children and women outside of the US and hid the increasing numbers of mixed-race children fathered by US soldiers.

These lessons from the National Archives altered which archives I’d need to travel to next in the United States and where I’d need to begin once I landed in Seoul, Korea for the second half of my fellowship year. The records also taught me that Korean War migration to the United States – of Korean adoptees and brides – began with the US military and was intimately tied to state projects that were inherently unequal. Reading the archives in ways unintended by the original authors revealed US military practices that forever changed the lives of Korean civilians. Embedded within US military memorandums, applications, tallies, and schedules, were the Korean children and women who did not choose war, but found themselves suddenly and intimately tethered to the United States.

⁶ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1.