

UNIVERZITA PALACKÉHO V OLMOUCI

Filozofická fakulta

Katedra asijských studií

BAKALÁRSKA PRÁCA

International Adoption of South Korean Children

Medzinárodné adopcie juhokórejských detí

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Olomouc 2022

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Prehlásenie

Prehlasujem, že som bakalársku prácu na tému *Medzinárodné adopcie juhokórejských detí* vypracovala samostatne a uviedla všetky použité pramene a literatúru.

V Olomouci dňa:

Podpis:

ANNOTATION

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|-----------------------------------|--|
| Title: | International Adoption of South Korean Children |
| Author: | Eva Riecka |
| Supervisor: | Dr. Andreas Schirmer |
| Number of pages: | 60 |
| Number of characters with spaces: | 114,568 |
| Number of used sources: | 134 |
| Keywords: | international adoption, intercountry adoption, Korean adoptee, adoptee, adoptive family, South Korea |

For many years, the issue of international adoption of children has been an important and sensitive topic worldwide, especially in South Korea, where since the emergence of intercountry adoption in the 1950s, tens of thousands of Korean children have been adopted to foreign countries such as the United States or Sweden. This bachelor's thesis is focused on the international adoption from South Korea, more specifically on its historical development, legal regulation, and current issues. The main objectives are to explain the preference for international adoption over domestic adoption and to observe how the topic of international adoption surfaces in the English-written Korean press. This is done by an examination of four Korean online newspapers and establishing various common themes among the articles.

ANOTÁCIA

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| Názov práce: | Medzinárodné adopcie juhokórejských detí |
| Autor: | Eva Riecka |
| Vedúci práce: | Dr. Andreas Schirmer |
| Počet strán: | 60 |
| Počet znakov vrátane medzier: | 114 568 |
| Počet použitých zdrojov: | 134 |
| Kľúčové slova: | medzinárodná adopcia, medzištátna adopcia, kórejský osvojenec, osvojenec, adoptívna rodina, Južná Kórea |

Otázka medzinárodných adopcií detí je už mnoho rokov dôležitou a citlivou témou na celom svete, najmä v Južnej Kórei, kde bolo od vzniku medzištátnych adopcií v 50. rokoch 20. storočia adoptovaných desiatky tisíc kórejských detí do cudzích krajín, ako sú Spojené štáty alebo Švédsko. Táto bakalárska práca je zameraná na medzinárodné adopcie z Južnej Kórey, konkrétne na ich historický vývoj, právnu úpravu a aktuálnu problematiku. Hlavným cieľom je vysvetliť uprednostňovanie medzinárodnej adopcie pred domácou adopciou a sledovanie ako sa téma medzinárodnej adopcie objavuje v anglicky písanej kórejskej tlači. To sa uskutočňuje skúmaním štyroch kórejských internetových novín a stanovením rôznych spoločných tém medzi článkami.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Andreas Schirmer, for his valuable advice and patience during the process of writing my thesis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-----|---------------------------------|
| NGO | Non-governmental Organization |
| US | United States (adj.) |
| USA | United States of America (noun) |

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EDITOR'S NOTE

For romanization of Korean, McCune-Reischauer system of romanization is used. In case of personal names, commonly used transcription is used. Romanized expressions are italicized except for Korean names.

In this thesis, the terms “Korean orphan” and “Korean adoptees” refer to children from Republic of Korea (South Korea). “Korea” is used to refer to South Korea. If referring to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the shortened phrase “North Korea” is used. The terms “intercountry adoption” and “international adoption” are used interchangeably throughout this thesis.

For a better readability of chapter 5 – “Intercountry Adoption in South Korean Press,” names of newspapers in citations are abbreviated as follows: *The Korea Times* – *KT*, *The Korean Herald* – *KH*, *The Hankyoreh* – *H*, and *The Korea JoongAng Daily* – *KJAD*.

INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Korea,¹ a country that has been getting a lot of attention predominantly among the young generation thanks to the globalization and popularization of Korean entertainment industry. Many of those showing interest in Korean culture and Korea are probably unaware of the unfortunate events that have had a strong effect on shaping the lives of many Koreans. One of these is in the center of this thesis. Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, Korea has become a hub of international adoption, sending over 200,000 children to find homes overseas (Eleana Kim 2010). Once getting positive reactions, a dramatic change in perception happened after holding the Olympic games in 1988 when this sensitive topic was abruptly publicized by Western media (Hübinette 2005, 40). Since then, this issue has become a matter of dispute and embarrassment for an otherwise economically flourishing country.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first four chapters summarize and explain the upsurge of intercountry adoption from Korea, from the first case of adoption through the biggest spike in the number of adoptees sent abroad from the early 1960s to the mid-1980s to its decrease and the fight for the complete abolishment of this intercountry adoption politics. Adoption agencies providing services of adoption to foreigners are introduced, together with current law enforcement, focused mainly on the Special Adoption Act and Hague Adoption Convention.

The last chapter is focused on the main objective of the thesis – What are the issues that are addressed when the topic of international adoption surfaces in English-written Korean newspapers? To what reasons is it attributed that so many Korean children were adopted overseas? Newspapers that will be the matter of discussion are *The Korea Times*, *The Korean Herald*, *The Hankyoreh*, and *The Korea JoongAng Daily* in the span of 12 years – from 2011 until 2022.

¹ Hereinafter Korea or South Korea

1 FROM THE BEGINNING OF INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ADOPTION AGENCIES

Throughout history, children have been displaced from their biological families to other families, orphanages, care centers, or have been institutionalized for many different reasons. Out-of-wedlock or teenage pregnancy, poverty and societal pressure on single mothers are current days' most prevalent reasons for adoption (Hübinette 2005; Eleana Kim 2003). Particularly during a time of tough ordeal of war when many parents have been victims of conflict, children have to part with their birth families. On the other hand, international adoption, as it is known today, did not begin until the end of World War II, when Americans started to adopt children from Europe (Oh 2015, 2). Eleana Kim (2010, 4–5) points out that these adoptions were looked upon as “a radical but temporary solution to child displacement wrought by war and its attendant social dislocation” and that “by the 1970s, (. . .) transnational adoption became an institutionalized social welfare practice in many nations and a naturalized ‘choice’ for individuals in the Euro-American West”. However, these adoptions did not receive the same amount of attention and publicity as adoptions from Korea did because of their invisibility – unlike adoptions from Korea, they were not interethnic nor interracial (Oh 2015, 5).

The first part of this chapter focuses on the predecessors of intercountry adoption from Korea before the Korean War. The second part focuses on the consequences of the Korean War, followed by scrutinizing the origin of international adoptees from Korea together with the milestone of the first adoption. The last part provides an explanation for the preference for international adoption over domestic adoption.

1.1 Before the Korean War

Although the number of international adoptees underwent an upsurge in the past century, there are cases of adoption dating back to previous centuries. Examples of three overseas adoptees before the Korean War will be addressed briefly.

The first person who is to some extent considered an intercountry adoptee from the Korean peninsula is dated to the 16th century. Antonio Corea, who is also considered the first Korean to visit Europe, was a war prisoner brought to Japan during the Imjin War, where he was sold at the slave market to an Italian merchant, Francesco Carletti (Savenije, 2000). Initially residing in India, Corea reached Europe in 1606 and got his name after

being baptized. He is believed to be the model for Rubens' painting of a man wearing a traditional Korean garment (Park 2004).

In the 19th century, Kim Kyu-sik was adopted by the family of a Presbyterian missionary – Horace Grant Underwood, who had been a crucial figure in the introduction of the Protestant faith in Korea. Kim Kyu-sik himself was an important person during the Korean independence movement, as he served as a diplomatic expert because of his fluency in English. Throughout his life, Kim handled various political roles, from being a foreign minister, and an ambassador to becoming the vice-president of at that time Shanghai-based Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea until its dissolution (Doh 1993).

The last example of a pre-Korean war international adoptee is Alexandra Kim Stankevich, who was the first prominent leader of Korean Communists (Lankov 2009). Alexandra was born in Russia and brought up by her Korean father until the age of ten, when he passed away. After his death, she was adopted by her father's Russian friend, Mr. Stankevich, whose son she later married. Her devotion, together with her language abilities in Chinese, Korean and Russian, was the perfect asset for the Communist party, which she joined in 1917 (Lankov 2017). Stankevich died by execution shortly after being arrested by anti-communist forces, which entered Khabarovsk in August 1918 during the Russian Civil War².

1.2 Consequences of the Korean War

The beginning of international adoption is entwined with the end of the Korean War in 1953. During the time of the war between 1950 and 1953, many people fell victim to combat. Numerous families were separated as a result of the country's splitting into two parts with differing political systems and philosophies. The country was fragmented politically, socially, and economically. Poverty rates spiked, infrastructure was destroyed, and many children who had lost their parents had to seek help. The total number of casualties counted to 2,800,000, including both Koreans and foreign troops, and approximately 100,000 children were orphaned, and 200,000 women were widowed due to the war (Dong Soo Kim 2007, 5). Although the total number of civilian deaths has never been exactly calculated, because of non-disclosure of the official fatality figures by the North Korean government, most scholars concur that approximately three to four

² The Russian Civil War began on November 7, 1917 and ended on June 16, 1923.

million Koreans got wounded, went missing, or died during this conflict, comprised of both North and South Korean civilians and soldiers (Oh 2015, 21–22). After the war, in 1954, it was estimated by International Union for Children Welfare that the number of abandoned children under the age of 18 was assessed to be as high as 2,000,000, with at least 10,000 abandoned children being orphans on the streets, completely homeless (Hübinette 2005, 52).

Since there was no formal legal process established for adoptions in Korea before the 1950s, the extended paternal family usually had the duty to rear orphaned and abandoned children, or they were raised in institutions managed by sectarian or public organizations (Sarri et al. 1998). As the number of abandoned children increased, so did the number of institutions caring for abandoned and orphaned children. In 1945, at the end of the Japanese occupation, there were 38 known child welfare institutions for 3,000 children; by 1957, 482 institutions were caring for 48,594 abandoned children, more than a twelve-fold increase of 444 institutions in 12 years (Hübinette 2005, 52).

1.3 Origin of Children Adopted Overseas

When looking at international adoptions from Korea, the origin of the adoptees cannot be omitted from the scope of focus. During wars, there is a countless number of cases of local women getting in contact with foreign soldiers. The Korean War case was not any different. Between the years 1950 and 1965, Korean women gave birth to 12,280 mixed children, later referred to as “Amerasians” or “GI babies”³ (Hübinette 2005, 56). United Nations soldiers who fathered these children often returned to their home country, leaving the babies in the care of their mothers, who, because of the circumstances and societal pressure, often abandoned their offspring too. Oh (2015, 7) explains that mixed-race children not only “confronted legal and social exclusion based on their race, assumed illegitimacy, and the low status of their mothers,” but they were also “stigmatized as the children of prostitutes, and their miscegenated origin threatened Korea’s nationalistic ideas of racial purity”. Moreover, under the enforced Korean law, citizenship was passed through the paternal line, which in the case of GI babies meant that “GI babies were stateless nonpersons who would never find legal or social acceptance” because of not being listed in the family registry (Oh 2015, 7). Being not listed in the family registry

³ GI is an informal way to call a US army soldier, especially during and after World War II.

meant the inability to access education, obtain a job, marry, and even receive traditional Korean burial rites (Oh 2005, 182).

Because of all these reasons, it is not surprising that post-war international adoption emerged with a large percentage of mixed-race children (Sarri et al. 1998).

Even though in 1955 most of the orphans were direct victims of the conflict, by 1961 the origin of the children was different. The fast industrialization in the 1960s resulted in the abandonment of more children by impoverished working-class unwed mothers, who were dealing with poverty and prejudice of not being married (Eleana Kim 2010, 24–25). An insufficient amount of money was allotted to social welfare and social service by the Korean government. Only two percent of South Korea's budget was allocated to social welfare, compared with forty percent allocated to national defense, which resulted in hopeless mothers finding other options to provide for their children and reinforced the reliance of welfare organizations on foreign sponsorship, and made them determined to max out the number of sponsored children they were taking care of to secure a steady flow of funds (Eleana Kim 2009, 18). Although international adoption was set up to decrease the number of orphans, the effect was contrary – the number rose significantly. Since at least 75 percent of the children in Korean orphanages were funded by sponsorship from the US, struggling poor single mothers considered the abandonment of their child as a better option and an opportunity for their offspring to have a proper care and education that they were unable to provide because of their tight financial situation and lack of financial support from the government (Pate 2014, 117), even if the relinquishment of their child meant putting them up for international adoption as the demand for domestic adoption was low (Oh 2015, 182).

Consequently, the initial group of GI children was later replaced with a racially homogenous group of Korean children who were relocated to Western nations such as the United States, France, and Sweden, which were also the largest recipients of Korean children, led by the USA, which accounted for the highest receiving number – 104,000 adoptions between the years 1953 and 2004 (Hübinette 2005; Sarri et al. 1998).

The First Adoption from Korea

The first formal and registered intercountry adoption of a Korean child took place in 1953, thanks to the authorization of the Korean Government and the Orphan Act and Refugee Relief Act passed by the American Congress in 1953, through which the act of proxy adoption was permitted, allowing Americans to adopt a child in foreign courts

through the use of a proxy agent acting legally in their name (Bowman, Gjenvick and Harvey 1961, 35; Hübinette 2005, 58). However, there are earlier records of children adopted abroad – already during the Korean War by foreign soldiers because of their solidarity and sense of belonging to the boys who once served as *homeboys* or *mascots*⁴. These children served as ambassadors between troops and Korean civilians, facilitating translation and providing goods and services (Oh 2015). They were used for simpler tasks as well, such as cleaning the barracks and keeping company with the soldiers. Also, cases of these boys sensing an otherwise unseen change in the surroundings, predicting an enemy's attack and preventing the death of many troops, can be found in historical annals (Oh 2015, 31–34). It was not only boys who served the military. Orphaned girls were used to “lift the morale and spirits of American GIs” with dancing and singing performances, as a sort of entertainment, “nurturing friendly relations” between Koreans and Americans by ensuring the happiness of US servicemen (Pate 2014, 57–58). During the Korean War and the following years, foreign troops, especially American soldiers, bonded with the boys who worked for them, and adoptions took place. Hence, it is contested whether the adoptions in 1953 were really the first international adoptions from Korea because of previous informal adoptions occurring throughout the war.

These adoptions of mascots by American soldiers were essential for the establishment of Korean adoption on a practical and ideological level (Oh, 2015). On a practical level, through handling and overseeing the early adoptions, Korean and American government organizations and social workers laid the framework for the systematization of international adoption from Korea, which resulted in the revision of their immigration legislation and efforts to create permanent orphan legislation. At the ideological level, it aided in “fostering international goodwill” and promoting the friendly basis of the US-Korean relationship, which was regarded as a crucial political function for the United States (Oh 2015, 46–47). Moreover, Oh (2015, 177) claims that “the international adoption industry played an important role in Korea’s “economic miracle” by bringing in foreign exchange, helping to nurture goodwill with powerful Western allies, functioning as a safety valve for excess population, and relieving the government of a large part of the burden of developing indigenous social welfare institutions”.

⁴ The terms *homeboy* and *mascot* were used among the military interchangeably.

1.4 Preference for International Adoption over Domestic Adoption

From the Confucian perspective accepted by Korean society, adoption was considered a continuation of family lineage with the mandatory fulfillment of filial piety (*hyo*) duties towards their parents, rather than regarded as assistance for finding a permanent home for children in need (Chun 1989, 255; Kim and Henderson 2008, 17). Due to the substantial impact of Confucianism's emphasis on blood ties in Korea, the prevailing belief appears to be that heredity, rather than environment, is the key predictor of infant development (Lee 2007, 77). On the other hand, according to Sokoloff (1993), the pivotal reason for the spike in interest in adoption, particularly newborn adoption, among couples without children in the United States since the 1920s is the shift in perception that environment, rather than heredity, is the most important determinant of child development. As a result, this widespread notion plays a significant role in explaining the low level of interest in adoption among Koreans and why the promotion of domestic adoption was not successful and international adoption was employed as an alternative method of child placement in the 20th century (Chun 1989, 255).

Moreover, the origin of the children was also an important factor in the promotion of international adoption over domestic adoption in Korea. GI children were considered a problem on two levels. A challenge to the traditional Korean mindset of a homogenous nation in Korean society and simultaneously a reason for suffering for the children themselves when their biracial, illegitimate, and poor social origin was the cause of their misery and discrimination (Oh 2015, 52). Efforts to emigrate these children overseas were proclaimed to be for the sake of the children's wellbeing, however, proponents of this idea, together with the Korean government, were significantly more concerned with the first level – the elimination of the challenge of the racial homogeneity of Korea (Oh 2015, 52). Even then-President Syngman Rhee recognized intercountry adoption as the best solution, stating that they would otherwise face future prejudice (Hosu Kim, 2016). The solution for both Koreans and Americans, who gained interest in this issue after the media coverage in *Life* and other, at that time popular magazines, was to relocate these children outside of Korea (Oh 2005, 164). During the 50s and 60s, this idea got even more prevalent with the social and geopolitical comparison of Korea as a stagnant, homogeneous region populated by “backward-thinking” people with the progressive and thriving US, where the international adoption would be the greatest chance for a better, thriving life (Choy 2009, 171).

2 ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED IN ADOPTION POLICY

During the Korean War, GI soldiers were the biggest financial contributors and sponsors of orphanages; however, once the war ended and the soldiers returned to the USA, financial aid also slowly ceased to exist (Pate 2014, 103–104). Nonetheless, the wide publicization of the hardships of Korean orphans in the Western media⁵ raised awareness of their condition worldwide and sparked the attention of various charities, NGOs, and Christian organizations predominantly established in the United States already during the Korean War. Among them, Foster Parents' Plan, Christian Children's Funds, Save the Children Federation, and World Vision offered an option of virtual adoption of a Korean child through financial sponsorship, which was only a step closer to international adoption itself (Hübinette 2005).

The American missionaries who came to Korea also had a great impact on the development of adoption policy; they were among the first to not only register the problem of orphaned children but also tried to solve it (Oh 2015). In 1954, a documentary *Other Sheep* was created by World Vision, depicting assistance and aid to the plight of Korean War orphans, through which they became a leader in sculpting American public impressions of Korean War orphans. Seeing this documentary while it was touring the US sparked interest in Harry Holt and his wife Berry, who are considered by many to be the couple who laid the foundation stone of international adoption from South Korea (McKee 2020, 359).

2.1 Holt International Children's Services

Moved by the movie about Korean orphans, Harry and Bertha Holt decide to adopt eight Korean children, claiming this decision to be a God's calling, fulfilling Harry's "marching order" (Oh 2015, 90–91). In 1955, Harry Holt left for Korea to aid orphaned or abandoned children, whilst Bertha sought the passage of a special bill through the United States Congress, which was indeed passed two months later, and Harry Holt returned to the US together with their newly adopted children (Holt International n.d.). At that time, the adoption of so many children was unprecedented and illegal since the number of Korean children allowed to be adopted by American couples was set by the Refugee Act to two children; hence the passage of a special bill was required (Pate 2014, 105). Upon adopting

⁵ Countless articles were published in at that time popular newspapers such as *Time*, *Life*, and *National Geographic*

these children, he realized that saving eight children was insufficient and returned to Korea in 1956 (Kang 2015). Holt's interest in the suffering of Korean biracial children and his urge to help them became so great that it was commonly believed that he would leave the adoption industry only after there were no mixed-race children left behind in South Korea (Pate 2014, 186). Holt's story was covered by newspapers across the whole country and resulted in encouraging interest in adoption among American couples.

The year 1956 marked a significant breakthrough in international adoption when the complementary desire of the South Korean government to eradicate GI children and the Americans' eagerness to adopt them was finally fulfilled on a large scale thanks to the establishment of the Holt Adoption Program (now Holt's Children Service and Holt's International Children Service), through which a substantial number of international placements happened (Oh 2015, 8).

From 1955 through 1958, more than a thousand Korean children were adopted by American families via the Holt Adoption Program; by the end of 1960, the number rose to two thousand, which even doubled to four thousand in 1967. The number of orphans adopted through the International Social Service⁶ was incomparable, accounting for just a hundred adoptions by the end of 1960, placing on average twenty orphans per year, with the figure rising to a hundred adoptions every year by 1965 (Pate 2014, 106).

In 1961, Holt's devotion to Korean children made him permanently reside in South Korea, where he used his savings to build the first orphanage in Ilsan, which at the beginning of its operation accommodated 700 children (Prébin 2013, 24). Pate (2014, 109) asserts that through the construction of Holt's orphanage, "he not only secured his very own supply of orphans (now composed of orphaned, abandoned, and separated children) for his adoption agency, but he also laid the foundation for a highly efficient system of processing orphans for overseas adoption".

Although the Holt adoption agency was praised by the general public for its contribution to providing help for children in need in South Korea as an independent organization, it was heavily chastised by competitor agencies in the United States for actively advertising proxy adoptions without implementing the common adoption agencies' practice of the trial period, in which the child lives with the prospective adoptive

⁶ International Social Service (ISS) is an international NGO that has been protecting the rights and welfare of children in more than 120 countries worldwide since 1924 (International Social Service n.d.). The first efforts of the ISS were primarily focused on migration and re-establishing family relations; and they also made American adoption of Japanese and German children possible after World War II (Hübinette 2005)

parents before the adoption finalization, and giving preferential treatment to Christian couples, even if they did not meet the adoption eligibility criteria for mixed-race child adoption⁷ (Choy 2007).

Holt is commonly believed to be the father of intercountry adoption from South Korea. However, although Eleana Kim admits that Holt “played an instrumental role in helping intercountry adoption to ‘flourish,’” she warns against heroizing him as the only reason for the formation of the Korean intercountry adoption industry since there were cases of intercountry adoption even before the enactment of international adoption law in Korea (Eleana Kim 2009, 3–6).

⁷ There are records of cases where the potential adoptive parents’ racist tendencies got ignored because of their religious beliefs

3 LEGISLATIVE OF INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION POLICY

Korean international adoption has been evolving throughout the years through legislative enactment and amendments. Although the legislative history of intercountry adoption from Korea is rich, this chapter is focused on the beginnings of intercountry adoption and the most pivotal legislative landmarks.

3.1 Administrative Means and Child Placement Service

The birth of intercountry adoption from Korea was complicated. In the absence of a law permitting international adoption, the Rhee administration used administrative means to facilitate the adoption of GI children and war orphans. Since intercountry adoption was a fresh concept, the Supreme Court with the government had to go back to statutes enacted in 1898 and 1912 to be able to conclude whether a Korean child could be adopted by foreign nationals (Oh 2015, 52). By 1954, Korean courts had formulated an “official interpretation” that “aliens (. . .) can legally adopt Korean nationals”; furthermore, the Korean government enacted a “Base Policy for Endorcement [sic] of Emmigration [sic] to the United States” (Oh 2015, 55). With the goal of providing international adoption of bi-racial children to the US and other Western countries allying with the South during the Korean War, Child Placement Service was established on January 20, 1954, by President Syngman Rhee, supported by foreign grants under the charge of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs (Hübinette 2004, 29). Since its establishment, almost every administration has attempted to restrict international adoption to some extent (Moon 2015).

This act started to slowly open the door towards the international adoption from Korea. In this chapter, significant legislative changes are summarized both in South Korea and the United States of America.

3.2 Refugee Relief Act

Unlike domestic adoption, in international adoption, the local country’s adoption laws are entwined with the laws of the adoptive parents’ country. As for the adoption from Korea, the first cases of adoption had a lot to do with the changes in the USA’s legislation since it has been the biggest recipient of children and a cooperator in facilitating intercountry adoption from Korea. By 1924, the USA technically forbade any kind of immigration of people of Asian descent and made them not eligible to obtain US citizenship; hence,

an alternation of the US legislation was crucial to make adoptions from Korea possible (Choy 2013, 78). In 1953, the US Congress enacted a Refugee Relief Act, allocating four thousand non-quota immigrant visas to refugee orphans adopted by US citizens (Pate 2014, 88). After the Act's expiration at the end of the year 1956, thanks to Holt's hard work, the US Congress passed the Orphan Bill in 1957, exempting Koreans from immigration quotas; with an amendment in 1961, which led to the prohibition of proxy adoption and embedded international adoptions in American law, "securing the future for international adoption from Korea to the US" (Hübinette 2005, 63).

3.3 Orphan Adoption Special Law and Child Welfare Act

After President Syngman Rhee's presidency ended by uprising on April 19, 1960, Korea was still dealing with poverty and overpopulation. During that time, there were two primary strategies employed to reduce the population, and it was by enforcing migration policies and family planning, where intercountry adoption may be considered a hybrid of both (Hübinette 2004, 30). As a result, the term of authoritarianism of Park Chung Hee (1961–1979) and Chun Doo Hwan (1981–1987) were to usher in a period during which intercountry adoption was at its peak, when three-quarters of total international adoptions from Korea took place, hitting its all-time high in 1985, with 8,837 Korean children finding a home overseas (Hübinette 2005). The 1960s also marked a breakthrough in the origin of adoptees when the predominant adoptees were no longer of bi-racial origin, but pure Korean blood, whose parents relinquished them due to poverty (Oh 2015, 182).

On September 30, 1961, a new law, the Orphan Adoption Special Law, was enforced with the goal of protecting the welfare and wellbeing of children designated for intercountry adoption (Sarri et al. 1998, 94). Shortly after that, the Child Welfare Act was adopted, offering a legal foundation for intercountry adoption as a less expensive alternative to pricey institutional care (Hübinette 2004, 31). The Orphan Adoption Special Law was revised twice, and the first revision stipulated that only government-licensed adoption agencies were allowed to facilitate intercountry adoption (Sarri et al. 1998, 94). Through this law, by illegalizing private adoptions and establishing the legal foundation of international adoptions, South Korea marked the start of the change from tradition to modernization "where international adoption was to become one of its most successful self-regulating and self-disciplining biopolitical technologies of social control and biological purification in the reproductive field" (Hübinette 2005, 64). Furthermore, this law also required international adoption agencies to provide domestic adoptions and gave

other thirty-one adoption organizations permission to process domestic adoptions (Oh 2015, 183).

In 2000, the Child Welfare Law was revised. This amendment was deemed particularly important since it was the first legislation that identified abuse and neglect as a condition necessitating government involvement in child protection and through which a 24-hour hotline and child abuse/neglect prevention centers were established (Lee 2007, 77).

3.4 The Family Planning and Population Control Program

In 1962, the Family Planning and Population Control Program was established with the aim to lower birthrates through the introduction of birth control, various types of contraception, implementation of sex education, economic incentives, tax reductions, the legalization of abortion in 1973, and widespread usage of sterilization, summing up to over 220,000 registrations between 1962 and 1975 (Donaldson 1981, 251). The program is deemed to be the most successful among the population control policies of developing countries in terms of achieving the goal of decreasing fertility rates, resulting in a decrease from 6.3 children per woman in 1960 to 1.6 children in 1990 (Hübinette 2005, 65). The Family Planning and Population Control is believed to be the cause that led to the so-called “baby drought,” which escalated in prolongation of the waiting time for adopting a child (Oh 2015, 156). This program was harshly criticized by Korean feminists for regulating and restricting women’s reproductive rights while preserving Confucian son preference and the male-centered family census register (Cho 1997).

Domestic adoption was remarkably promoted between 1962 and 1970 when government workers and officials were each required to take care of an orphan. As a result of this mandatory nationalistic campaign, it was the first time that the decade ended with domestic adoptions outnumbering overseas adoptions by 2,081 children (Hübinette 2004, 31).

3.5 Five-Year Plan for Adoption and Foster Care

After receiving criticism from North Korea for liberalism in international adoption policies at the end of the 1970s, the South Korean government responded by adopting the Five-Year Plan for Adoption and Foster Care in 1976–1981 with the aim of reducing international adoptions by promoting domestic adoption through limiting the number of licensed international adoption organizations to four and establishing a quota system

(Sarri et al. 1998). The implemented quota system required each agency to meet a certain percentage of foreign to local placements, however, adoption agencies were unable to meet the domestic adoption quota due to “cultural resistance to western-style adoptions in Korea,” so instead agencies were required to offer social assistance to children and families (Eleana Kim 2009, 19).

While organizing the Summer Olympic Games in 1988, through which Korea received worldwide acclamation, Korea became chastised by the US press for selling its “greatest natural resource,” its people (Eleana Kim 2003, 64). Hence, more adoption policy restrictions followed. The development during the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games is observed in the following chapter.

3.6 Special Adoption Act 2012

As of August 5, 2012, the Special Adoption Act was enforced. The purpose, as it is stated in Article 1, “is to set forth the necessary requirements and procedures of adopting a child in need of protection, and other matters necessary to support such adoptions, which are all aimed at promoting the rights and welfare of the adopted child” (Kim and Hwang 2015). This Act embodied the shift in the main objective of the law from abolishing adoptions to ensuring the best for the child. The law comprises of 8 chapters and 45 articles, through which many changes were introduced.

In the first and second paragraphs of Article 3 of the Act, it is stipulated that every child has the right to their biological family and that only if this right cannot be secured, it is necessary to find an adoptive family. These two paragraphs are the only ones that explicitly advocate care of the child’s birth family as a better alternative to adoption. The ambiguous usage of the term “family” which is not specified, could lead to an assumption that if a child is brought up in a single-parent household, it is better to give the child for adoption.

Article 4, “The Principle of Adoption,” (Kim and Hwang 2015) specifies that every adoption must be carried out in the best interests of the child. It was the first time that the well-being of a child was fully incorporated as a sole principle of adoption into the legislation, changing the fundamental concept from “the best interest of the family” to the “best interest of the child,” which has been slowly starting to integrate into Korean legislation after the amendment of the Family Law in 1990 (Lee 2007, 77).

Article 7, “Promoting Prioritization of Domestic Adoption,” (Kim and Hwang 2015) promotes domestic adoption over international adoption, whereas Article 8

declares that the government should take measures to reduce adoption to foreign countries while ensuring the protection of the child, their rights, and freedom. International adoption is only possible if the adoption agency cannot find suitable parent candidates in Korea in cooperation with all adoption agencies. At least three attempts to place a child domestically are required; only after the results of the attempts are thoroughly reviewed, international adoption can be considered (HCCH 2020a).

This law also stipulates the qualifications of not only the prospective adoptive family but also the adoptive child, and differentiates between the adoption process of a foreigner living abroad and a foreigner living in Korea, where the regulations for a foreigner residing in Korea are the same as for a Korean citizen. In the case of the prospective adoptive parents residing overseas, compliance with the adoption regulations of their own country is required. This is a crucial implementation since, in the twentieth century, the process of adoption from overseas was, in many cases, easier and more accessible than domestic adoption (Hübinette 2005).

Through this law, it is evident that the Korean government is making an effort to keep the child in the biological family. However, the government should try to inspect the reasons for the relinquishment of the child since it is not determined under what circumstances parents can give their child up to an adoption agency for adoption. It would be prudent to determine these circumstances in order to avoid adoptions for economic reasons that ensure a better future for the child or adoptions of children of single mothers who are encouraged to do so in maternity homes by the agencies themselves, despite the fact that they are capable and willing to raise the child themselves (Hosu Kim 2015).

Other significant changes include the Act's requirement of adoption agencies to provide adequate counseling to biological parents on benefits and subsidies in cases where they decide to not relinquish the child; consent for adoption cannot be given before the seventh day of the child's life; and at the same time, a child younger than one week cannot be adopted; if the adoption is proceeded without fully informed approval, a revocation of the adoption can be filed by biological parents. If a child is older than 13 years old, the child's consent for adoption is required. However, these legislative modifications can only be viewed as a failure because child abandonment has grown since the passage of the Special Adoption Act. "This apparent failure may be because the Act ignores the social and cultural context surrounding adoption and children born out of wedlock in Korea today" (Sook. K. Kim 2015, 716). Moreover, the implementation of the seven-day rule and the requirement to report the birth of a child to the government leads

to more anonymous abandonment because of the fear of being stigmatized (Sook. K. Kim 2015, 719).

Furthermore, adoption agencies are no longer allowed to operate unwed mothers' homes. At the same time, it is illegal to pay for "consent" to a child's adoption by any means. This regulation is intended to give women time to reconsider adoption and to withdraw from it, and presumably to stop the practice of "legal orphans" – a child whose right to be raised has been relinquished by one or both parents (Hosu Kim 2015).

For the purpose of promoting domestic adoption, the government designated May 11 as National Adoption Day in 2006, although it was not until the passage of the Special Adoption Act that the date was included in the legislation.

3.7 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption

For many years, international adoption has been perceived as a humanitarian act, a good deed, service to society, and help for a country in need. However, various humanitarian acts have sparked criticism and the public's disapproval. Because of this, both receiving and sending nations have, in certain cases, participated in international initiatives for the regulation of intercountry adoption, based on the assumption that it should be the government and the fellow citizens, who should determine the future of the children, and this process shall not be done by an outsider, no matter how noble their intentions (Louie 2019).

The Hague Adoption Convention of May 29, 1993⁸ is probably the most famous initiative with the goal of eliminating child trafficking and defending children's rights and interests. This Convention was enforced on May 1, 1995, and up to this date, the number of contracting parties is 104 (HCCH 2020b). The Hague Adoption Convention states that placing orphaned children within their families should be the priority, with domestic adoption as the second option. Only if neither of these is possible, intercountry adoption can be enforced as a last resort. Furthermore, it should only be undertaken with the consent of the child's country of origin (HCCH n.d.). Although South Korea signed the Hague Adoption Convention on May 24, 2013, up to this date, it has not been ratified (HCCH 2020b). This is the only international agreement on intercountry adoption that

⁸ The full name: Convention on Protection of Children and Co-Operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption

was signed by Korea. In relation to the Convention, Korea is planning a revision of related domestic legislation and eventually its ratification (HCCH 2020a; e-narajip'yo 2022).

4 FROM 1970S TO THE PRESENT DAY

With thousands of Korean children being internationally adopted every year in the last century, it raises the question of to what extent Koreans were aware of this practice and, moreover, what their attitude towards the overseas adoption practice was. In the first part of this chapter, the awareness of international adoption in Korea in the 1970s is discussed, followed by the circumstances of the 1988 Summer Olympic Games and the development of this issue to the present day.

4.1 1970s and Awareness of International Adoption in Korea

As the number of adoptees to overseas was rising, so should have Korean awareness of this issue. However, since there is little evidence of Korean adoptees appearing in the press before the 1970s, Hübinette (2005, 82) assumes that “international adoption was conceived of as a relatively uncomplicated and uncontroversial emigration practice and treated as an integrated part of the child welfare issues of mixed-race and abandoned children during the previous decades”.

Nonetheless, in the 1970s, international adoptions started to be slowly perceived as an issue when North Korea accused and criticized the South of child trafficking because of their international adoption practice (Sarri et al. 1998). As a result, efforts were made, and, for a short period of time, adoptions overseas to Scandinavia were restricted, although the effect on the overall number of adoptions was minimal, as the children designated for adoption to Scandinavia were allocated to American families instead (Hübinette 2005). Moreover, as a response, the Korean government implemented quotas in 1973, demanding that ten percent of adoptions to be domestic (Hübinette 2005, 70–71).

Under the Chun Doo Hwan presidency⁹, international adoption increased even more, and during the decade reached 70,000 children, of whom the majority were born out of wedlock. An intriguing fact is that the first half of the 1970s and the middle of the 1980s saw the biggest emigration flow from Korea to almost the same nations affected by adoption (Hübinette 2002, 146).

Amidst harsh criticism from overseas and the Korean media, international adoption hit an all-time high in 1985; albeit there is no specific evidence to clarify the rise during the 1970s and 1980s (Sarri et al. 1998, 95), Prébin (2013, 21–22) claims that this

⁹ Chun Doo Hwan tenure was from September 1, 1980 – February 24, 1988.

significant increase in the 1980s, demonstrated in the government statistics, was connected to the South Korean government taking control of the four major adoption agencies and the subsequent facilitation of the adoption process.

Another criticism of international adoption practice arose during the organization of the 1986 Asian Games and 1988 Summer Olympic Games (Sarri et al. 1998, 97). Ever since holding these two sports events in Korea, “the subject of international adoption is treated there like a national trauma, a source of shame and humiliation and a painful reminder of the country’s dependency on the West” (Hübinette 2004, 20).

4.2 1988 Summer Olympic Games

In 1988, South Korea held the Summer Olympics in Seoul as a showcase of the country’s success and economic development after the hardships caused by the Korean War (Manheim 1990). By organizing a worldwide event of this extent, it is natural that, together with positive aspects, negative facets surface also, and it draws the foreign press’s attention to international adoption as well. Harsh criticism of the practice arose quickly, and nothing was more humiliating for Koreans than hearing of their country being referred to as a child exporter, regardless of its accuracy (Oh 2015, 176).

In its January issue, the American publication *The Progressive* published an investigative story portraying South Korea as a country engaging in the commerce of children, which was promptly serialized in the North Korean magazine *The People’s Korea* and has been since then a regular subject of discussion over South Korean adoption, resulting in negative publicity and reinforcing Korea’s reputation as the world’s largest child exporter (Hübinette 2002, 146–147). In 1989, the Korean government responded by enacting new legislation with the long-term objective of prohibiting all intercountry adoption and, for the time being, restricting international adoption just to biracial or children with impairments (Sook K. Kim 2015, 713).

As Korea became more globally known thanks to the 1988 Olympics, adoptees began to visit their native country in the late 1980s and early 1990s, eager to learn more about their roots by attending language and culture classes, motherland tours organized by cultural institutions, adoption agencies, and the government, or to find their biological family; some of those decided to stay long-term (Eleana Kim 2007, 116).

4.3 Korean Globalization

From an economic perspective, globalization is seen by South Korea as a positive development, nevertheless imposing danger on Korean culture and identity (Alford 1999, 143). “Globalization must be underpinned by Koreanization,” said President Kim Young Sam¹⁰ (1995, 273) as he started his globalization push in 1995. The president determined that the best way to do this was to re-establish contact with Koreans living abroad, who are officially classified as assets in the globalization effort (Hübinette 2002). According to Kim’s perspective, the Korean diaspora continues to be a state-created construct that encompasses any individual of Korean heritage living abroad, instilling in them a sense of belonging and a deep commitment to their native country (Prébin 2013, 31).

As part of this ethnic mobilization, the inaugural World Korean Ethnic Festival was hosted in 1993; special government scholarships for overseas Koreans were introduced in 1996; and the Overseas Korean Foundation was established in 1997 as the predominant authority dealing with overseas Koreans with the primary goal of helping Korea thrive economically (Overseas Korean Foundation 2004, 5). After that, The Overseas Korean Foundation Cultural Awareness Training Program for Overseas Adopted Koreans was established by the Ministry of Health and Welfare in 1998 (Eleana Kim 2010, 180).

In 1994, a government plan to phase out international adoption was revoked because domestic adoption numbers were still considerably low; in lieu of establishing a yearly adjustable drop of 3 to 5 percent with a goal of the complete elimination of international adoption by 2015; however, it was later canceled, and up to this point, there is no designated date when overseas adoption will end ultimately. (Hübinette 2004, 36).

The adoption problem continued to be a prominent issue under Kim Dae Jung’s administration¹¹. During his tenure, Kim issued a formal apology to adopted Koreans in 1998 for sending them abroad for international adoption (Hübinette 2007, 224). Although Kim is mostly known for his Sunshine policy, for which he was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize, during his administration, together with his wife, he showed a notable dedication to the topic of adoption and adopted Koreans, and the globalization policy expanded (Hübinette 2003a). On the note of globalization, Kim Dae Jung wrote: “Globalization does not mean to live together with other countries and nations, but in the first place to

¹⁰ Kim Young Sam’s tenure was from February 25, 1993 – February, 24 1998.

¹¹ Kim Dae Jung’s tenure was from February 25, 1998 – February 24, 2003.

reconnect to our own blood line, amicably and tenderly. That may function as the bridge which will make globalization possible” (as cited in Hübinette 2003b, 261–262).

Koreans living abroad were invited to return as part of a worldwide economic consolidation initiative and to contribute to Korea’s global image. After being recognized as “overseas Koreans,” in 1999, international Korean adoptees gained the status of overseas Koreans, which made them eligible to gain F-4 visas, allowing them to reside in Korea for two years while having the same benefits of the possibility to enter the labor and real estate markets, invest and attain healthcare and pensions; however, this acknowledgement of their “political and economic citizenship disregards the difficulties of negotiating the ‘culture citizenship’ of Korean adoptees in South Korea and elsewhere” (Eleana Kim 2003, 59).

In 1999 and 2001, two visiting programs were launched, the first one organized by the Overseas Korean Foundation and the second one by the National Institute for International Education Development. In the 1980s, adult Korean adoptees began to organize themselves into organizations. The first organization of this kind was the Adopted Koreans’ Association of Sweden, founded in 1986, and since then, organizations have been established in almost all countries that have engaged in adoption from Korea, and conferences and gatherings for adopted Koreans have been held regularly all around the world since 1995 (Hübinette 2003a).

4.4 Adoption in Contemporary Media

In the 1990s, international adoption became a popular topic portrayed in documentaries, essays, and films, and visiting programs for adoptees were established. Among the movies, Susanne Brink’s 1991 movie *Arirang* is one of the most famous, depicting the hardships of an adult Korean adoptee in Sweden (Hübinette 2002). Since then, various movies have been made. One of the most recent ones from 2019, a documentary called *Forget Me Not*, directed by a Danish Korean adoptee, follows the story of three unwed women deciding whether to keep or put their child for adoption. In June 2022, a movie called *Broker* was released with a star-studded cast, expected to attract many viewers. This movie is a breakthrough in raising awareness on the topic of child relinquishment and adoption on the big screen.

Movies like these are not made just to raise awareness of adoption but according to Eleana Kim (2000, 46) “Korean adoptee films are performances of the search for identity

and seeks to approach ‘Korean adoptee-ness’ as historical, contingent, emergent, and particular”.

4.5 Current Adoption Development

Since 2000, total number of adoptions, both domestic and overseas, have been slowly declining, from 4,046 adoptees in 2,000 to 415 adoptions in 2021. The year 2013, marked an annual decrease of 968 children, which was the most significant decline in this century. It can be attributed to the Special Adoption Act which was enacted in 2012. Since 2007, the number of domestic adoptions has been consecutively higher than international adoption (KOSIS 2022). The process of international adoption has an overall downward trend, having hit its all-time low last year, amounting to just 189 international adoptions and 226 domestic adoptions, with a total of 415 adoptions. The changes throughout the years are illustrated in the Table 1.

By 2021, a total number of 249,635 children have been adopted, although in 2021 both domestic and international adoptions decreased significantly due to the impact of COVID-19 and low fertility rates (e-nara ch’ipyu 2022). With yearly lowering numbers of childbirths, it is only expected that the total number of adoptions will continue to decrease. As for the children in the orphanages waiting for adoption, there are several types of incentives used to attract potential domestic adoptive parents. Public awareness is one of the important aspects. For that reason, Adoption Day on May 11 is celebrated via Adoption Week events, gaining more attention while promoting domestic adoption. Moreover, economic incentives are also part of the effort, such as New Adoption Congratulatory Fund, a one-time payment of two million won from the government and child support allowance up to 200,000 won. Furthermore, in order to reduce overseas and promote domestic ones, when a public official adopts a child, 20 days of adoption leave, including the date of adoption, can be obtained. (e-narajip’yo 2022). The current situation of the ratio of international to domestic adoptions can be attributed to the enactment of the Special Adoption Act 2012, which is discussed in subsection 3.6.

Table 1: Domestic and international adoption 2000 – 2021

| YEAR | DOMESTIC | INTERNATIONAL | TOTAL |
|-------------|-----------------|----------------------|--------------|
| 2000 | 1 686 | 2 360 | 4 046 |
| 2001 | 1 770 | 2 436 | 4 206 |
| 2002 | 1 694 | 2 365 | 4 059 |
| 2003 | 1 564 | 2 287 | 3 851 |
| 2004 | 1 641 | 2 258 | 3 899 |
| 2005 | 1 461 | 2 101 | 3 562 |
| 2006 | 1 332 | 1 899 | 3 231 |
| 2007 | 1 388 | 1 264 | 2 652 |
| 2008 | 1 306 | 1 250 | 2 556 |
| 2009 | 1 314 | 1 125 | 2 439 |
| 2010 | 1 462 | 1 013 | 2 475 |
| 2011 | 1 548 | 916 | 2 464 |
| 2012 | 1 125 | 755 | 1 880 |
| 2013 | 686 | 236 | 922 |
| 2014 | 637 | 535 | 1 172 |
| 2015 | 683 | 374 | 1 057 |
| 2016 | 546 | 334 | 880 |
| 2017 | 465 | 398 | 863 |
| 2018 | 378 | 303 | 681 |
| 2019 | 387 | 317 | 704 |
| 2020 | 260 | 232 | 492 |
| 2021 | 226 | 189 | 415 |

Source: KOSIS. “Kugnaeoe ibyanghyŏnhwang.” Last modified May 16, 2022.

https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=117&tblId=DT_11770N001&conn_path=I3

5 INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION IN SOUTH KOREAN PRESS

5.1 Methodology

The aim of this thesis is to observe how the topic of international adoption surfaces in English-written newspapers and to what reasons is it attributed that many Korean children were adopted internationally rather than domestically. For that reason, four online newspapers were examined – *The Korea Times*, *The Hankyoreh*, *The Korea Herald* and *The Korea JoongAng Daily*¹² between year 2011 and 2022. Keywords *intercountry adoption* and *international child adoption* were used to find articles related to adoption overseas.

Total number of articles added to 133 and out of those 79 were observed and organized into groups with a common theme. From these four newspapers, *The Korea Times* were the ones which had the highest number of articles published on this topic, with a separate series about Koreans adopted abroad called *Dialogues with Adoptees*¹³ established in 2021. Bellow an overview of themes occurring in the newspapers is presented.

5.2 Comments on Special Adoption Act 2012

Between 2011 and 2013, the enforcement of the Special Adoption Act was covered by the press. Most of the articles from that time focused on the process of creating the Act and its effect on adoption practice. According to *The Korea JoongAng Daily* (July 6, 2011), this Act marks “a new era for adoption,” and the importance of the participation of adoptees and single mothers in drafting the Act is emphasized as an innovative approach since it was the first time of these parties’ involvement in creating a bill (*KJAD* June 30, 2011). It is believed that “under these new legal protections, adoptees will no longer be subjected to unfair and erratic treatment during birth information search” (*H* July 7, 2011), and that the search itself will be for adoptees more accessible (*KH* August 2, 2012). Moreover, the measure that was enacted creates a legal framework to assist South Korea in meeting international standards as outlined in the Hague Adoption Convention (*H* July 7, 2011), and it puts Korea on a path to ratification (*KJAD* June 30, 2011).

¹² Hereinafter in citations *The Korea Times* – *KT*, *The Korean Herald* – *KH*, *The Hankyoreh* – *H*, and *The Korea JoongAng Daily* – *KJAD*.

¹³ Until June 15, 2022, this series consisted of 38 articles.

Some newspapers expressed support for the enactment (e.g., *KT* February 28, 2013). One article stated that “the government should be praised for making these meaningful steps in the right direction” (*KJAD* July 6, 2011). However, other articles showed criticism towards the Act, complaining that the help for single parents was insufficient in comparison to the new law that limited their options and that it raised concerns that, despite the good intentions, the harsher regulation is out of step with Korean attitudes toward single parents and adoption (*KH* October 10, 2012; *KJAD* October 21, 2012). Some articles pointing out the shortcomings of the law called for a revision (*KH* September 12, 2013; *H* September 20, 2013), especially of the mandatory registration to the family registry, which, according to Steve Morrison, increased child abandonment (*KT* July 25, 2013). This opinion is supported by Susan Cox, who thinks that the requirement that birth mothers must sign a family registry needs to be eliminated since it has resulted in a rise in abandonment (*KH* October 11, 2018). However, this idea is contested by Rami So, who claims that there are no objective statistics about the correlation between the increase in abandonment and the Act and that the Act should not be misrepresented as a cause of unwed mothers for the abandonment of their children in a baby box (*KT* March 15, 2013). Another author adds that “there were some stories of infants being abandoned in bathrooms, but what’s not mentioned is that these women were mentally ill and didn’t use other safe haven mechanisms” (*KT* November 24, 2019).

The observed articles show that the Act has supporters and opponents, whereas some authors remain neutral.

5.3 Comments on Hague Adoption Convention

Similarly with articles with the focus on Special Adoption Act, articles with the main theme of the Hague Adoption Convention had an informative function at the beginning of the examined period, providing a source of information on the process of signing the Convention and the measures that had to be taken to be eligible to sign (*KT* October 23, 2012; *KH* November 16, 2012). “We are in the process of making domestic law accord with the standards of the Convention,” stated a *The Korea Times* article (November 16, 2012) and one of the efforts to do it was through the Special Adoption Act. Some articles (*KH* May 24, 2013; *KH* May 26, 2013) announced the signing of the Convention, whereas *The Korea JoongAng Daily* (May 26, 2013) stated that Korea hopes to change the adoptive culture dramatically and that it marks the end of a shameful Korean reputation. However, another commentator warns that “although every country has its

own unique culture, every country must also find a way to meet obligations under international agreements. The Korean government should sincerely seek to fulfill the spirit of the Hague Convention (. . .) it should not sign the Convention just to save face or lean on ‘culture’ as an excuse to meet its obligations” (*KT* May 27, 2013).

Although some of the articles focus on the positive aspects of the Convention, Trenka and Smolin state that even though signing and ratifying the Hague Convention can be successful in preventing or minimizing future wrongs, there is no proper alleviation, and redress for decades of past wrongdoings will not be accomplished through it (*KT* May 27, 2013). Also, Champod claims that the Convention is “more recommendation rather than imperative agreement” and criticizes the lack of a worldwide international court, “similar to the European Court of Human Rights, whose jurisdiction applies only to the member states of the Council of Europe” (*KT* June 5, 2013). There are mentions of adoptees questioning “the efficacy of the Convention in ensuring adequate safeguards for children” (*KT* December 21, 2017).

In another article, it was pointed out that because “the Ministry of Gender Equality — which is in charge of single parent policy — and the Ministry of Health and Welfare are not coordinating with each other, it will also be extremely difficult for Korea to properly implement The Hague Convention’s principle of subsidiarity, which means that family preservation must be tried before determining if the child is adoptable” (*KT* August 16, 2016).

In *The Korea Times* (December 21, 2017), there is a mention of the government submitting a motion to ratify the Convention in 2017, although unsuccessfully, and another author suggests that in case of ratification, the government should prepare for it “by expanding support for Korean single mothers through public transfer and also by enforcing child support by fathers” (*KT* May 27, 2013).

Even in 2022, regardless of the scope and impact of the country’s inter-country adoption program, Korea is unable to adhere to the commitments of the Convention, which protect the safety, welfare, and rights of children in procedures and matters relating to such adoption (*KT* January 8, 2022).

5.4 International Adoption as a Child Welfare and its Prohibition

There are various opinions about whether international adoption should be abolished or continued. This opinion is also inconsistent among adoptees.

Newspaper articles also reported that international adoption is no longer perceived as a humanitarian act (*KT* May 7, 2022), and other article stated that “South Korea should stop the program and develop a sustainable child welfare and family support system. Adoption (. . .) never ‘saved’ enough children. It’s a business. It’s demand-driven. It’s not child welfare, and it needs to be better” (*KT* November 24, 2019).

Some articles expressed the opinion that international adoptions should be prohibited, and some said that it should continue for the time being since “children have a fundamental right to grow up in loving families, whether they are adopted in Korea or overseas” (*KH* October 31, 2011). The author adds that although he believes that “international adoption needs to come to an end someday, (. . .) now is not the time as there are so many children growing up in institutions who need homes,” and at the same time, he is convinced that international adoption is a better option than institutionalized care, because of a higher possibility of university education since orphans “fall significantly below the educational opportunities of ordinary Korean children with families,” and because of the “extreme hardships” children have to go through after leaving the orphanage (*KH* October 31, 2011). Another proponent opinion was stated in *The Korea Times*, where it is argued that “international adoption is not about placing children from one country to another, it’s about giving them a family,” and because of that, “she believes it is better for a child to find a family abroad than to stay in an institution, which is the case of most adoptees in Korea” (*KT* May 22, 2017).

In relation to the prohibition of intercountry adoption, one author’s opinion is worthy of reflection: “It is one thing to say adoption should stop. But then what are the alternatives? Is it reasonable and ethical for children to bear the weight of the controversy?” (*KH* October 11, 2018).

5.5 Birthmothers and Single Mothers

The topic of single mothers and birth mothers is a very sensitive topic that is commonly mentioned in the majority of articles about international adoption. In most of the articles, at least one of these terms is mentioned.

Parts of the articles focus on the need to expand the support of single mothers, as most cases of child relinquishment are due to the lack of; moreover, some demand similar financial support as would be given to orphanages to help them keep the children (*KT* November 16, 2012). This opinion is also supported by the United Nations, which “recognized single mothers as a population needing adequate support and protection from discrimination through awareness-raising and public education campaigns” (*H* October 14, 2011). “I think it’s most important to support single mothers. It’s necessary to create an environment where a single mother can raise her child with support. No one should feel forced to give up her own child,” claims another supporter (*KH* December 22, 2014). However, another article shows concern that “as long as Korea continues to adopt children away, the development of support to unwed mothers will continue to change very slowly” (*KH* October 31, 2011), hence this article argues that a total prohibition of intercountry adoption is needed in order to elevate the living standards of unwed mothers.

Discrimination against unmarried women is also a topic frequently recurring in newspaper articles. One adoptee expressed her outrage for the prejudice against unwed mothers: “It makes me angry when I hear that a woman can’t raise her own child, not because of war or famine but because she’s a single mother. Korea’s adoption policy and the social prejudice against unwed mothers and their children are forcing Korean babies to become international adoptees” (*KJAD* May 9, 2011). One author claims that she is “ashamed of Korean society for continuing to discriminate against unwed women and the Korean government for betraying their children” (*KH* October 31, 2011). *The Korea Herald* proposes that the government should work on improving people’s unfavorable attitudes towards unwed mothers since it is the prevalent bias against them that makes life for them difficult, and the author adds that “if they were not discriminated against in finding employment, they would have far less difficulty raising their children on their own” (May 11, 2014).

Another article states that when it comes to adoption, birth fathers are sometimes overlooked, and apart from their financial responsibilities such as financial support, their

rights should be addressed not just by mothers but by the entire community, claiming that “adoption is not exclusively a woman issue” (KT June 5, 2013).

5.6 Right to Search for Origin and Identity

It is often said that it is a human right to know one’s identity and origin. Its importance was stressed throughout many of the newspaper articles.

One author from *The Korea JoongAng Daily* said that “adoptees’ desire to want to know about their biological parents is a human right” (May 9, 2011). Another article calls this right a “right to origin” (KT December 16, 2021). Lee, who collected articles for *The Korea Times*’s series on Koreans adopted abroad, remarked that she “noticed that despite the different perspectives and arguments, the right to origins as a universal human right resonated throughout the articles” (KT January 15, 2022).

According to *The Korea Times*, the Swedish Korean Adoptees’ Network argues that “a child’s right to know its origin is stronger than the parents’ right to remain anonymous” (KT September 2, 2014). *The Hankyoreh* reports the viewpoint of the Korea Adoption Services president, who believes that “every adoptee has the right to search, and every birth parent has the right to protect their privacy,” and even if the identity of the birth parent is not revealed, they attempt to establish an anonymous connection by revealing the place of birth and region of origin of the birth mother, which can still assist adoptees in learning about their unknown past (H December 2014).

Another author brings attention to the denial of the right: “The right to know one’s identity is being denied. The Korean adoption system must not be allowed to be driven by profit. (. . .) If human rights violations are caused by legislation, the government has an obligation to change the law. The receiving countries, too, must undertake their co-responsibility to restore their citizens’ rights to knowing their identities” (KT June 27, 2021). On the note of the accepting countries, *The Korea Times* pointed out that “receiving countries should act to protect and realize the rights of their own nationals to know their true identity. Because after all, adoptees are the citizens of receiving countries” (KT January 8, 2022).

In articles about the search for the origin of the adoptees, their personal stories are often retold. The stories vary from adult adoptees reclaiming their Korean identity (KT July 17, 2021) to children’s stories (KT November 27, 2013). Some started searching because of their own accord (H July 21, 2019), and some because of their spouse’s encouragement (H June 19, 2014). Others are not searching actively but would rather

prefer the meeting with their birth family to be “a natural process” (*H* May 5, 2014). There are also mentions of children of Korean adoptees learning Korean (*H* May 5, 2014; *H* June 19, 2014). The importance of DNA testing while searching for the family is stressed (*KH* August 15, 2016; *H* April 4, 2017). One article claims that “DNA is a game changer for finding roots” and because “adoptees are still entitled to their medical histories,” they emphasize the importance of knowing the origin to be able to prevent health issues (*KH* April 13, 2016).

5.7 Perception of International Adoptees and Associated Misconceptions

Eleana Kim (2012, 306–308) proposes that the perception of international adoptees varies from victims of the developmentalist state to “lucky cosmopolitans” in the context of globalization and econometric measures of “human capital,” moreover, being an overseas adoptee is often perceived as an advantage, as some people think of this experience as a form of study abroad through which children can accumulate a significant part of their qualification (*sŭp’ek*) – fluency in English, which Koreans yearn for.

One article state that “families of origin have been and are led to believe that international adoption is like a study abroad program, and that their children will return” (*KT* May 27, 2013). This opinion is supported by another article reporting a case in which the birth mother was misled into thinking that her children “would eventually come back after studying for a time in Minnesota” (*KT* August 2, 2011). Nevertheless, another author claims that they “don’t think Korean families believe that their children given for adoption are just studying abroad. However, misconception (fantasy) on inter-country adoption is still persistent” (*KT* June 5, 2013). Another article supports this opinion: “It is not like studying abroad. There is so much lost when you are adopted” (*KH* April 6, 2014).

There are several articles telling the stories of successful adoptees, but the most highlighted one during the observed period is Fleur Pellerin, a former French Minister of Culture and Communication and present-day entrepreneur, whose story was covered in various newspapers due to her business trip to Korea in 2013 (*KH* March 23, 2013; *KJAD* March 29, 2013). Other examples of successful adoptees are the world-renowned harpist Lavinia Meijer (*H* February 9, 2018) and Luke McQueen, a singer and an entrepreneur (*H* May 28, 2018).

Although stories like these might make the reader think that adoption overseas is a practice leading to adoptee's success, "promoting the stories of so-called 'successful' adoptees obscured the systematic injustices and harm done to the children through the process of intercountry adoption" (*KT* October 9, 2021).

In contrary to a common Korean opinion that adoptees are leading a better life overseas, one article states that "international adoption is no guarantee that the adoptee will do well and be well-treated in the new country. Instead, international adoptees also meet prejudice in their new home countries" (*KH* October 31, 2011). Jun Jung-sik, an adoptee, said that "his life has been marked by insecurity about being uprooted, emotional pain caused by his abandonment, and uncertainty about his identity" however, through his healing process of drawing, he became a well-known comic artist in Europe (*H* May 5, 2014). There were cases where intercountry adoption did not lead to a better life but to domestic abuse and unsuccessful replacement into a different family, resulting in "severe emotional wounds" (*H* July 21, 2019). "The tragedy of my life all started with my adoption," said a Korean adoptee who got lost at the age of 7, got misidentified as an orphan, and was adopted overseas to a life full of negligence and paternal violence, and eventually, without US citizenship, got deported back to his motherland (*KJAD* May 30, 2013). Cases of violence on adoptees are not rare, and in 2014, newspapers reported on the most serious one – on an adoptee who was beaten to death by his adoptive father (*KH* March 4, 2014; *KH* April 6, 2014).

5.8 Lack of Citizenship and Dual Citizenship

Articles belonging to this section can be divided into two themes. Some discuss dual citizenship, while other are focused on the lack of citizenship.

Dual citizenship for Korean adoptees overseas became effective in 2011, 3 years after a campaign for dual citizenship had been launched. Adoptees can restore their citizenship because of having a Korean registry record of when they were born. Articles discussed advantages that come with being a dual national, such as being able to own a property, run a business, and obtain a credit card, which foreigners cannot, but also stressed the disadvantages, such as military service, no Korean-language scholarships, and problems with integration into the Korean society because of the inability to speak Korean (*KH* June 20, 2011; *KH* November 18, 2013).

Unlike in Europe or Australia, until 2001, citizenship was not automatically granted to overseas adoptees in the United States. Adoptive parents had to report to the

government, and only after that were the international adoptees able to acquire citizenship.

The fact that Korean adoptees do not possess citizenship is often discovered by chance while applying for a passport, loan, or a job. This was also the case of Joy Alessi, who found out about it while preparing for her overseas holiday (*H* October 28, 2016). The author in an article from *The Korea Times* briefly mentions three adoptees, neither of them being naturalized, of which two got deported back to Korea because of committing a crime, and the third one returned on his own accord to reconnect with his roots (March 4, 2012). By 2019, the deportation of adoptees had become an alarming issue; summarized in Kristine Pak's words: "Recently, one of the bigger issues that have become very hot is the fact that people who were adopted to the U.S. — not just from Korea, but from all over the world — were being deported by Immigration and Customs Enforcement" (*KT* November 24, 2019). An article from 2021 reported that the total number of Korean adoptees living in the US without citizenship is estimated at 26,000 (*KT* July 17, 2021) and that all of them can be potentially subject to deportation for "petty crimes such as shoplifting" (*KT* March 4, 2012).

For some adoptees, it is difficult to accept the reality of not holding citizenship. It has been reported that one adoptee in his twenties, upon finding out about his statelessness, committed suicide from shock (*H* October 28, 2016), and another one, named Phillip Clay, "died by suicide after being forced to rebuild his life in a cultural and linguistic environment he did not understand" (*KT* November 24, 2019).

The most covered case of a deported adoptee is certainly Adam Crapser, a man who was adopted to the United States, experienced domestic violence, and humiliation, became homeless, and his felonies, which ranged from burglary to assault, made him deportable under immigration law; after he applied for a green card, his trial started, and he got deported (*H* April 1, 2015; *KJAD* November 1, 2016; *KH* October 11, 2015). In 2019 Crapser filled a lawsuit against the Korean government and Holt Children's Services Inc. for violating his rights during his adoption process, which marks "the first and only attempt by an inter-country adoptee to hold the Korean government accountable for failing to uphold its duty in such an adoption" (*KT* March 25, 2022). This lawsuit is still pending. A series of three articles followed this case, elaborating on the main legal points to raise awareness of the adoptees on their rights and help them recognize the injustice committed against them (*KT* April 2, 2022; *KT* April 9, 2022; *KT* April 16, 2022).

5.9 Immoral practices

During the practice of international adoptions from South Korea, there have been several types of immoral practices related to the readoption agencies, foreign adoptive parents and the relinquishment of a child.

Although many international adoptions appear to be handled properly, many adoptees have discovered that atrocities happened in order to enable them. An article from *The Korea Times* states that many of these include examples of questionable relinquishment, in which someone else, not the rightful parent, gave a child away; the child being given up for domestic adoption, not for international adoption; signatures look to be forgeries; abduction of children by relatives prior to adoption; and in some cases, children were abducted by orphanages, which informed the parents that their child had gone missing or had died (*KT* August 2, 2011). *The Korea Herald* informed on a case of a 24-year-old adoptee who, while searching for her biological parents, found out that she had been wrongfully reported dead at birth and was abducted by a midwife seeking adoption fees. She said that adoption should not be perceived as an industry. “We’re (adoptees) human beings. We’re not products. We’re not for sale. You can’t put a price on a human life,” she claims (*KH* September 24, 2012).

Another example of an immoral practice is adoption without going through a government-approved adoption agency. A case like this happened before the revision of the Korean adoption law when a child was adopted by the Duquets family to the US. *The Korea Times* states that under Korean Adoption Laws, “any adoption not involving a certified agency is considered illegal” (*KT* January 11, 2013). However, the author of an article for *The Korea Herald* questions its illegality since “evidence points to the fact that this case is closer to kidnapping, as the Duquets did not follow any U.S. or South Korean procedures mandated for a legal adoption” (*KH* February 24, 2013). The baby was taken from the family, returned to South Korea, and was to be put up for domestic adoption. Regarding this topic, Susane Cox states that she was shocked to see that a large portion of the general population in both Korea and the United States supported the Duquets’ attempts to keep the baby and criticized the government for protecting her, whereas, in reality, the government was protecting both the baby and the procedure necessary to guarantee legal and ethical adoptions for all children both locally and abroad (*H* January 23, 2013).

5.10 Movies and Dramas

International adoption is a topic that has been frequently used in cinematography. Recently, in the past two years, newspapers have started to release more articles reporting on the release of movies, documentaries, and dramas, covering intercountry adoption with the goal of raising awareness about it and sharing the individual stories of the producers, who are Korean adoptees themselves.

The first articles from this chapter report on the success of an autobiographical animated movie called *Approved for Adoption*, depicting the life of the author, Jun Jung-sik, as a Korean adoptee to Belgium. Articles write about the success not only of this film: “The movie received the grand prize in the animation category of the 17th Japan Media Arts Festival. It became the first foreign animation to win the top prize in the festival’s history,” but also about the author’s success, naming him a “successful cartoonist” (*KH* April 17, 2014). Other articles describe the movie’s plot and dive into his personal story (*KH* May 9, 2014). About the movie, Jung remarks: “This film is not about holding anyone responsible. This is a story about a single child, who is not a European or a Korean and how he survives the process of growing up. This is my story, but it is also the story of all adoptees” (*H* May 5, 2014). In 2021, Jun was awarded the Honorary Award at the 23rd Bucheon International Animation Festival (*KH* October 24, 2021).

In 2019, the documentary *Side by Side* was introduced to the public by *The Korea Herald*, which mentions how this documentary came to exist, showcasing interviews with the adoptees and explains that “their emotional firsthand accounts range from abandonment to growing up abroad and, in some cases, reuniting with their birth families” (*KH* July 26, 2019). The producer of this documentary said that they “wanted to bring the experience (of hearing other adoptees’ stories) to the tens and tens of thousands of Korean adoptees that are in the world who haven’t had a chance to wake up this part of their minds and hearts” (*KH* July 26, 2019). This documentary is also briefly mentioned in another article; however, it mainly focuses on the producer’s life story (*KT* August 22, 2019).

Similarly with the abovementioned pieces, the documentary *Forget Me Not* was discussed both plot-wise, and the life of the author, Sun Hee Engelstoft, was scrutinized in the articles (*KJAD* June 7, 2021). Of all the articles focusing on cinematography, this documentary was the most elaborately covered by the press. Again portrayed as a successful adoptee, the newspaper emphasized that “she was accepted to

the prestigious National Film School of Denmark,” and to an interview question from *The Korea Times* about what she hoped that the viewers would take away from her film, Engelstoft answered: “I hope that this film gives a voice to people who have always been silenced, to get their hidden stories out, and I hope that the attitude toward single parents and the children of them lifts out of prejudices and becomes more acceptable” (*KT* May 19, 2021). She stated that while filming her documentary, she began to doubt all of the information she had been given about adoption, noting that: “Especially the phrase that my mother had given her away as an ‘act of love’. I learned that women give up their children due to desperation and blackmail” and that she considers intercountry adoption to be a human rights violation (*KT* May 21, 2022).

From the type of articles mentioned above in this section, one article differs significantly. In it, movies and dramas produced by Koreans are scrutinized, criticizing the fact that most of them filmed on the topic of adoption are examples of “stereotypical Korean adoption fantasy” misrepresenting and altering the realities of adoptees’ lives (*KT* December 4, 2021). Although there are several variants to the plot, the fundamental premise is the same — an adoptee is brought into the US, serving as a symbol of a wealthy, developed western nation, and eventually goes back to Korea, where they face various difficulties. They are heavily dramatized to pique the public’s curiosity, but this enthusiasm ebbs and flows quickly. The author claims that the stories are kept light enough to avoid any critical contemplation that may result in a generalized feeling of guilt or responsibility in Koreans, and unlike documentaries by Korean adoptees, these dramas, “instead of representing the complexity of their experiences, adoptees’ lives are reduced to clichés” (*KT* December 4, 2021). Lee warns that “Korean dramas and movies distort and manipulate the truth of adoptees’ lives to assuage the collective guilt society feels for what it has done to its most vulnerable members. As long as this practice prevails, the adoption myth will remain the predominant adoption narrative in Korean society’s consciousness” (*KT* December 4, 2021).

CONCLUSION

International adoption is a sensitive issue that has affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, not only the adoptees themselves but also their families – biological and adoptive. This thesis is divided into two parts, from which each answers one of the objectives of the thesis.

The first part of the thesis established a historical background from the start of international adoption to the present day. In order to be able to understand this issue, it is essential to be familiar with the historical context of intercountry adoption. For that reason, the historical development was elaborated upon in the first part. This part answers the first objective by explaining the preference for international adoption over domestic adoption, which can be attributed to the low interest in domestic adoptions because of the Confucian emphasis on blood ties and prejudice towards mixed-race children after the Korean War. Furthermore, because of the low financial support for single mothers, relinquishing a child meant higher chances for a better future, although the low demand for domestic adoption meant placing them up for international adoption. In this part, the upsurge of international adoption is explained, together with the decrease to present-day numbers. Significant law amendments were discussed, with the main focus on the Special Adoption Act and the Hague Adoption Convention.

The second part of the thesis is comprised of an observation of how the topic of international adoption surfaces in English-written Korean newspapers. *The Korea Times*, *The Hankyoreh*, *The Korea Herald*, and *The Korea JoongAng Daily* were the newspapers under examination between the years 2011 and 2022. During this period, a total of 133 articles were published under the used keywords, from which nine common themes were found, and 79 articles were examined scrupulously. How each of these themes was covered is elaborated in detail in the individual subchapters.

Although these articles' examination focused on a relatively broad time range of 12 years, it is clear that this set period was a limiting factor. If looking at a more significant period before 2011, different themes would have probably been covered, and the changing perception of society could have been observed. However, that was not possible because of the limitations of online sources since the availability of online articles before 2011 was scarce and in some newspapers unavailable, and the battery of articles in the examined period was already extensive.

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