



**Between European Colonial Trafficking, American Empire-Building and Nordic Social Engineering: Rethinking International Adoption From a Postcolonial and Feminist Perspective**  
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International adoption, the movement of predominantly non-white children from the postcolonial, so-called Third World to white adoptive parents in Western Europe, North America, Australia and Scandinavia, was born in the chaotic aftermath of the catastrophic and genocide-like Korean War. This forced child migration, which today involves around 30,000 children annually, has seen the trafficking of an estimated half a million children to date. Within this estimation, at least 160,000, or one third, come from Korea and 80,000, or amazing 15%, have been placed in the Nordic countries.

In the 1950s, the practice was initiated as a rescue mission with strong Christian fundamentalist and particularly Lutheran undertones, while it came to be perceived as a progressive act of solidarity during the left-liberal 1960s and 1970s. Today, and since the 1980s, international adoption has developed into a consumerist choice in the leading adopting countries and regions of the United States and Scandinavia. Whilst it has become the last resort for singles and homo- or heterosexual couples who, for example, may be suffering from infertility, a discourse of internationalism and multiculturalism celebrates international adoptees as bridges between cultures, symbols of interethnic harmony, and embodiments of postmodern cosmopolitanism. At the other end of the line, in the countries where the children are adopted, most governments, like the one in Korea, look upon international adoption as a degrading and humiliating business. At the same time, they view it as a necessary evil, well aware that it generates huge amounts of money and sustains a profitable adoption industry.

Instead of following in the footsteps of these dominant ways of looking at international adoption, I am examining the practice from a different perspective here. I make use of international adoption from Korea as my principal case study, since Korea has by far provided the most children for

international adoption, and since the practice itself was initiated in connection with the Korean War. International adoption is put in relation to a particular Western mode of adopting, and to other trans-racial adoptions and forced migrations in the history of European colonialism. Furthermore, it is set within the context of the emergence of U.S. world dominance after the Second World War. International adoption is also connected to Korea's militarized modernisation process, and seen as a patriarchal method of disciplining and regulating women's bodies and reproduction. After a presentation of the Nordic countries as the world's leading adopting region (in the name of social engineering), by way of conclusion, I argue that it is necessary to study international adoption from a critical postcolonial and feminist perspective in order to fully understand its origins, history, current status and future.

### **The Western Mode of Adoption**

The first point of departure is that international adoption reflects a particular Western adoption method, which nowadays spreads rapidly across the globe through international conventions, that is destroying and replacing non-Western traditions of fostering children among extended kin networks. The modern Western notion of adoption is deviant, in a worldwide anthropological perspective, in the sense that it is overwhelmingly extra-familial – there is no biological relationship between the birth and adoptive parents; above all, the link between biological parents and the adoptee is totally cut off in order for them to remain unknown to each other, while the adoptive parents give the child a completely new identity by law.

This unique and peculiar Western mode of adoption can be seen as a compensation for the complete break-up of the extended family in Western countries and its replacement with the nuclear family following the process of modernisation.<sup>1</sup> As a result, contemporary Western middle-class concepts of abandonment and abandoned children diverge fundamentally from those of non-Western societies, where the practice of fostering and circulating children among relatives is much more common than adoption itself. Such concepts are today made hegemonic through conventions on international adoption, like the Hague Convention.<sup>2</sup>

### **Comparative Child Migration and Forced Migrations**

While international adoption was initiated on a large scale in connection with the Korean War, European missionaries, soldiers and settlers had occasionally adopted "indigenous" or "native" children prior to this time. Examples of trans-

racial adoptions, preceding as well as paralleling the Korean case, are the 50,000 Native American children, the so-called “lost birds”, who were placed in white families in Canada and the U.S. up until as late as the mid-1990s, and the “stolen generations” of 25,000 Aboriginal children in Australia, who were forcibly separated from their parents, between 1900-1970, and transferred to the custody of Anglo families as a civilizing project.<sup>3</sup> However, contrary to international adoption, these examples of adoptions of children from indigenous and minority groups to white families are today highly contested or charged and sometimes even branded as ethnocide or cultural genocide.

In a comparative migratory perspective, the closest parallels to international adoption in the history of child migration would be the 130,000 children, who were shipped by the British Empire to populate the colonies between 1618-1967, and the 100,000 American children, who, between 1854-1929, were transported by the “orphan train” from the East coast to settler families in need of labour in the Frontier Midwest.<sup>4</sup> While questions of race and ethnicity are seldom considered in relation to these early child migrations, an incident that occurred during the orphan train program, illustrates their racial and colonial underpinnings.<sup>5</sup>

In 1904, a group of forty New York orphans was sent to live with Catholic families in Arizona. However, the Catholics turned out to be Mexicans and the local Anglos were so outraged at this race boundary transgression that they instigated a mass abduction of the children. Through this direct action, trans-racial adoption as a white privilege was resolutely reinforced. This privilege continues in the contemporary era. One can only imagine the reactions occurring, if Korean middle-class couples, whether living in Korea or overseas, suddenly started to adopt white children, or if Korean children were to be sent to Latin American or African countries for international adoption. In the pre-Civil Rights United States, a handful of states even went so far as to legislate against interracial adoption or even fostering of white children by non-whites, and in the late 1990s a widely publicized controversy erupted, when a black woman in Detroit wanted to adopt a white girl.<sup>6</sup>

Having imported almost half a million children to Western countries over a period of fifty years, contemporary international adoption has come to have many parallels to the Atlantic slave trade. Examples include the shipping of 11 million Africans to indentured labour in the New World, between 1510-1870, 12 million Indians and Chinese dispatched as “coolies” to the vast European

Empires between 1834-1941 and, finally, the contemporary trafficking of non-Western women for international marriage and sexual exploitation. These four examples of forced migration can be conceptualized as a long standing Western tradition of commodification and intercontinental transportation of non-white populations.

Numerous striking similarities come to mind, when we compare the transatlantic slave trade and international adoption. Both practices are driven by insatiable consumer demand, private market interests and cynical profit making, and both utilize a highly differentiated system of pricing where the young and the healthy are the most valued. Both are dependent on the existence of native intermediaries in the form of slave hunters and adoption agencies as well as a reliable and efficient global transportation system of ship routes and flight logistics. Both the slaves and the adoptees are separated from their parents, siblings, relatives and significant others at an early age, stripped of their original cultures and languages, reborn at harbours and airports, Christianized, re-baptized; both assume the name of their master/parent and, in the end, only retain a racialised, non-white body that has been branded or given a case number. The so-called “servant” or “house slave” must be the closest parallel to international adoptee, as both are living permanently together with their “masters” and both are legally defined as belonging to their household and their family. Notwithstanding, both practices are legitimized by the same shallow argument that, when moved to their new homes, the actual material situation of the subject is unquestionably bettered, since benefiting from the wealth and civilisation of the West. Last but not least, both groups are brought over only to please and satisfy the needs and desires of their well-to-do buyers and owners.

A crucial difference between the four forced forms of migration is of course that the transatlantic slave trade and indentured labour belong to history, whilst trafficking in women is illegalized and universally condemned. Only international adoption remains largely uncontested, legalized through various international conventions that privilege Western concepts of adoption before non-Western ones. Furthermore, international adoption is bolstered by contemporary geo-political and socio-economic trends, including the globalization of predatory neo-liberal capitalism, recent bio-political transformations in the international division of labour, the mass popularisation of the discourse of multiculturalism and a middle-class birth rate that has fallen below replacement level in practically every every Western country.<sup>7</sup>

### **U.S. Empire-Building**

Already at the end of the Second World War, about 5,000 children from China and Taiwan, Eastern Europe and Greece, Germany, Italy and Japan – many fathered by American occupation soldiers – had been transferred as unaccompanied refugee children to the United States.<sup>8</sup> However, it was in Korea, with the Cold War atmosphere and the beginning of U.S. empire-building, that the practice of international adoption originated, immediately after the war. Organised by Western individuals and voluntary agencies, it was instigated to transfer mixed children, fathered by U.S. soldiers, the products of large-scale sexual exploitation and military prostitution, to adoptive homes in the United States and Western Europe. The issue of mixed race children and war orphans, and their difficult conditions in Korea, was openly discussed in the Western media in the early 1950s, where their numbers were often widely exaggerated.<sup>9</sup>

This public interest in and obsession with the mixed children of post-war Korea is strongly reminiscent of how Eurasian children in the French and Dutch colonies of Southeast Asia, products of informal concubinary relations, or rape and prostitution, were viewed and treated during the classical imperialist age. These children were objects of rescue fantasies and relief projects for the European homeland populations and especially feminist and Christian philanthropist and humanist groups.<sup>10</sup> Represented as abandoned orphans, in reality these children were often physically and forcefully separated from their native mothers and brought together at special orphanages and boarding schools. The aim of this practice was to uphold white prestige, to protect the children's perceived Europeanness from being culturally, linguistically and morally indigenised, and to prevent them from growing up with politically dangerous and even murderous resentments towards their white fathers and the West in general.

In an international perspective, the Korean War marked the beginning of the Cold War and the initial stage in global U.S. hegemony. The heavy U.S. involvement in the origins of international adoption and an early interest in Asian children can in other words be interpreted as an expression of a Cold War mentality.<sup>11</sup> Through a discourse of familial love as well as tropes of child rescuing, anti-Communism and U.S. paternalist responsibility, the U.S. was depicted as the benevolent “white mother” creating familial ties to Asians by sponsoring or adopting Asian children. In this discourse, Asians were simultaneously infantilised and feminised, and portrayed as being unable to take care of their own children. International adoption therefore became an integrated part of U.S. foreign policy in order to facilitate

political relations and legitimate anti-Communist interventions in the region, while at the same time giving ordinary Americans a sense of personal participation in the Cold War, as family ties became a political obligation.

The same pattern followed in country after country. Especially in the East Asian countries, which from the outset were the primary suppliers of international adoptees, the Korean situation became the standard. U.S. invasions in countries like Vietnam and Thailand, resulted in international adoption from those countries. Thus, it is no coincidence that the leading countries supplying children for international adoption to the West almost all fall under the American sphere of influence and have been exposed to U.S. military intervention, presence or occupation. These include: Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, India as well as Sri Lanka in Asia, Colombia, Chile, Brazil, Peru, Honduras, Haiti, Mexico, El Salvador and Guatemala in South America, and Ethiopia and South Africa in Africa. The fact that adoption from Asia dominates the “market”, further underscores the Orientalist imagery at work, where, in many Western countries, Asian children are widely perceived as being docile, submissive, clever, hardworking, kind, quiet and undemanding – besides being cute, childlike and petite.

### **The Korean Modernity Project**

In 1961, South Korea’s nation builder Park Chung Hee installed a dictatorial military regime of harsh oppression of students and workers and ruthless regimentation of its citizens. It was governed by fierce anti-Communism, developmentalism and modernisation theory.<sup>12</sup> At the time of the military revolution, Korea was still an agrarian society suffering from the typical symptoms of mass poverty and overpopulation characteristic in developing countries. Within a period of thirty years, the Korean authoritarian developmental state transformed itself – with an astonishing speed and a horrifying efficiency – from an agricultural society to a modern industrial nation. The two principal measures implemented to decrease the population were family planning and emigration. This way, international adoption naturally became a perfect combination of both. Hence, the era of authoritarian regimes between 1961-87 were to become the years when international adoption witnessed its heyday as three out of four placements occurred during the period.

One of the earliest actions of the military government was to pass Korea’s first modern adoption law to facilitate international adoption as an alternative to

costly institutional care.<sup>13</sup> The decree created a legal basis for international adoption of Korean children and established a framework for an effective adoption industry unsurpassed in the world due to its efficient agencies, speedy procedures and secure logistics.<sup>14</sup> The law stipulated that every adoption must take place according to Korean law and through a government licensed agency working closely with a Western counterpart, both of which charged fees to the adoptive parents.<sup>15</sup> The agencies mandated for international adoption were expected to employ professional social workers, doctors and nurses to run orphanages as well as providing both long- and short-term foster care and domestic adoption. The passing of the adoption law and the setting up of an institutional framework for international adoption mark the professionalisation of social work and the bureaucratisation of social welfare in Korea in accordance with the logics of social science and scientific expertise. It marked the beginning of Korea's rocky road from tradition to modernity, with international adoption as one of its most successful self-regulating and self-disciplining technologies of control and purification in the reproductive field.

In 1979, president Park Chung Hee was killed by one of his closest aides, and after a short democratisation period, the new military strongman president Chun Doo Hwan came to power through a *coup d'état*. In 1980, the new government outlined its new approach to international adoption, integrated in the so-called non-governmental foreign policy to expand the emigration program and further develop friendship ties with Western allies.<sup>16</sup> Through a process of government deregulation, the quota system was abolished and the agencies were allowed to compete with each other to track down unrestricted numbers of adoptable children. Consequently, a thriving adoption industry was created resulting in the largest numbers ever sent abroad in a decade, with almost 70,000 international placements. The agencies engaged in profit-making business activities and real estate investments, ran their own delivery clinics, foster homes and temporary institutions, and most importantly operated a growing number of maternity homes for young, single and unmarried mothers to secure a continuous supply of newborn and healthy babies.

The number of international adoptions has decreased after the democratisation in the 1990s, and currently involves around 2,400 Korean children every year. At the same time, the relinquishing mothers are nowadays almost all teenagers or at least under the age of 25, spending their pregnancies behind the secluded walls of the agencies' own maternity homes. The majority come from a middle-



class background where the stigma of pre-marital sexual activity has the potential to ruin future social advancement for both the parents and the child. So in Korea, for more than half a century, international adoption has been a machine-like and economically rewarding business for adoption agencies, an easy way out of avoiding social welfare expenditure for the Korean government, and most importantly a brutal method of upholding a rigid patriarchal norm system for Korean society as a whole. International adoption is, in other words, one of the Korean modernity project's most long-lived technologies of power; to cleanse the country of "impure" and "disposable" outcasts in the name of developmentalism and eugenics.

### **Nordic Social Engineering**

Official statistics from the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare show 156,000 international adoptions having taken place between 1953-2004, although some mention as many as 200,000, including thousands of unaccounted private adoptions. A little more than 100,000 are American cases, constituting nearly one third of all international adoptions in the country and one out of ten of the Korean-American population. Then there are over 5,000 adopted Koreans dispersed throughout Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where they again make up a substantial part of the international adoptees in those countries. The close to 50,000 adopted Koreans in Europe, in countries like France, Germany, Switzerland, England, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, again represent an estimated one out of three of all international adoptees on the continent. Amazingly, half, or almost 25,000, can be found in the Nordic countries, especially in Sweden, Denmark and Norway.

The reason for this heavy Scandinavian engagement with international adoption can be traced back to the movements of unaccompanied refugee children in connection with the World Wars, in which the Nordic countries played a crucial role.<sup>17</sup> After the First World War, thousands of children of war (*Kriegskinder*) from the disintegrating empires of Austria-Hungary and Germany were transferred temporarily as foster children to the Nordic countries under the supervision of the Red Cross and Save the Children.<sup>18</sup> The process was reiterated before and during the Second World War when Jewish children from Nazi-dominated Central Europe were brought to Scandinavia and other Western European countries (the *Kindertransport*), and when 70,000 Finnish children of war (*sotalapset*) were moved temporarily to Sweden and Denmark of whom 10,000 never returned and stayed permanently as adopted or foster children.<sup>19</sup>



Both Sweden, Denmark and Norway participated in the Korean War with military hospitals in the U.S.-led anti-Communist alliance. The three Nordic countries stationed large numbers of relief workers, missionaries, and medical doctors and nurses in post-war Korea, of whom the first generation of adoptive parents to Korean children were to be found. In Scandinavia, the 25,000 adopted Koreans today constitute half (Denmark and Norway) to one fifth (Sweden) of all international adoptees, besides being the largest East Asian minority, and it totally dominates the ethnic Korean presence in and migration to the region as there are very few Korean immigrants living there. There are altogether less than a hundred adopted Koreans in Finland, Greenland, Iceland and the Faeroe Islands. Sweden, with its 45,000 international adoptees from over one hundred different countries, is proportionally the leading adopting country in the world and, in absolute numbers, the second only after the United States. In the U.S., the Scandinavian-Americans are remarkably dominating international adoption as well, and naturally adopting from Korea with an estimated 15-20,000 or 15-20% of the adopted Koreans in the country, having been placed in the very Scandinavia-like state of Minnesota. This group of adoptees constitutes more than half of the ethnic Koreans living there. With a population of 5 million, Minnesota is without doubt the region with the highest density of adopted Koreans in the world.

Lutheran missionary zeal, combined with an early tradition of taking in foreign children and a formidable 20th century success story in terms of economic development, have apparently made Scandinavians dominate the field of international adoption both in Europe and in the United States. The Scandinavians discovered the miseries of the postcolonial Third World in the 1960s and 1970s, and almost felt an obligation to save children from poor backgrounds, while another less idealistic motive, which is worth mentioning, was the sudden disappearance of adoptable Nordic children as a result of rapid economic growth leading to a high participation of women in the labour force, as well as the development of an advanced social welfare system. The Nordic countries are also outwardly perceived, and see themselves, as the world's most humanitarian, anti-racist and pro-feminist countries – a paradise for human rights. In other words, Nordic self-righteous social engineering goes hand in hand with European colonialism, American imperialism and Korean patriarchy.

## Summary

So to conclude, by contextualizing international adoption within the history of European colonialism, U.S. empire building and Nordic social engineering, and examining the intimate relationship between colonialism and modernity, I conceptualize international adoption as a mixture of, on one hand, a colonial project which involves trafficking and commodifying non-Western children, and, on the other, a modernist project which involves regulating and controlling women's reproduction in order to uphold a patriarchal norm system in the countries of origin, such as Korea, as well as a upholding self-image of humanitarianism, anti-racism and multiculturalism in the receiving countries, like in Scandinavia. I have thus here been trying to understand how international adoption has developed and exists between a complex dynamic of the twin projects and double bind of colonialism and modernity.

## Notes

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