

Gender & International Adoption

Sociologists for Women in Society Fact Sheet

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International Adoption: A Definition

The adoption of a child involves the official transfer of parental rights for that child from his/her biological parents (or, in some cases, the state) to the adoptive parent(s). In the case of international adoption, parental rights cross national boundaries: a child born in one country becomes the legal responsibility of a parent or parents residing in a different country. International adoption affects more than 30,000 children, moving between more than 100 countries, every year (Selman 2002).

Similar to other forms of lawful immigration, international adoptions are bound by the regulations of the *sending* and *receiving* nations, as well as the guidelines of international treaties like the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption. Also similar to other forms of immigration, international adoption is a gendered phenomenon.

Gender and the Sending Nation in International Adoption

While reported incidents of child kidnapping and trafficking are increasingly common, most children become legally eligible for international adoption after parental death, relinquishment (i.e., formal surrender), or abandonment (i.e., anonymous placement to be found). Focusing on South Korea and China, two major sending nations in international adoption, this section highlights many of the gendered components of this eligibility.

South Korea

Foreigners have adopted more children from South Korea than from any other nation in modern history (Ahn-Redding and Simon 2007). Korea's adoption program can be traced back to domestic social changes resulting from the Korean War, particularly a rise in the number of children born of multiracial parentage (i.e., Korean women and Western military fathers) and/or to single mothers. Fractured and impoverished, the post-war Korean extended-family unit had little room for a non-Korean, illegitimate child or his/her shamed mother. As a result, these children were frequently orphaned. Given that the traditional prioritization of biological ties hindered their adoption by unrelated Korean families (Register 1991), international adoption became one way the Korean government, with the help of Western social and religious organizations, came to serve this parentless population.

Poverty, social and familial opposition to single-motherhood, and low social welfare spending caused Korea's international adoption program to expand in the decades following the Korean War (Kim 2005). Between 1954 and 2003, Westerners adopted more than 200,000 Korean children (Eng 2003). Notable, however, is the gender of the children most often abandoned or relinquished during that time: approximately 58-percent were girls (Freundlich and Lieberthal 2000). This gender discrepancy flows from many of the same social forces that preclude single-motherhood and domestic adoption in Korea, including the preference for boys in patrilineal inheritance systems.

While it continues today, Korea's international adoption program entered a period of dramatic decline in 1990 (Fisher 2003). This decline can be attributed to the nation's improved global economic position and domestic pressure on the Korean citizenry to better care for Korean-born children.

China

The waning of South Korea's international adoption program was followed by an unrelated, but equally gendered, trend in adoptions from China. The passage of the China Adoption Law of 1992 officially allowed foreigners to adopt Chinese children, making China the dominant sending nation in international adoption since 2000.

Adoptions from China were made necessary by the one-child-per-couple policy (OCP) of 1979: a government initiative that aimed to simultaneously slow China's population growth and expand the nation's economy by limiting many (though not all) Chinese couples to only one child (Greenhalgh 1994). Government sanctions for infractions of the OCP disproportionately target women. In addition to the heavy fines and employment penalties incurred for the birth of an over-quota child, Chinese women also risk forced abortions and/or involuntary sterilization (Riley

1997). Despite its illegality, child abandonment has become one significant way couples control their childbearing in a time of restricted fertility.

Although China's fertility rate has dropped dramatically, the nation's skewed sex ratio of reported births reveals that girls also bear the brunt of this policy (Johnson 2004). In many rural regions, where families toil without the benefit of government pensions, the birth of a son is both a cultural and structural necessity: a family's longevity is seen to depend on their sons, whose labor power, unlike that of daughters, is not lost to another family in marriage. While bound to less-stringent variants of the OCP, many rural families make extreme decisions in their quest to bear a son, including hiding or abandoning daughters, selectively (and illegally) aborting female fetuses, or, in rare cases, committing female infanticide (Tessler, Gamache, and Liu 1999). As a result, the vast majority – at some estimates, more than 90-percent – of the Chinese children who are adopted internationally are girls (Selman 2007).

China's international adoption program reached its peak in 2005, when foreigners adopted more than 14,000 Chinese children (Selman 2007). Since 2006, however, this program has been on the decline; a phenomenon Chinese officials attribute to government campaigns to promote domestic adoption and the social value of girls.

Gender and the Receiving Nation in International Adoption

Just as there are gendered forces that *push* women from specific nations to relinquish their children (most often their daughters), gendered forces also impact the extent to which these children are *pulled* into specific nations at various moments in history. To best exemplify this gendered pull, this section focuses on the nation that receives the most international adoptees each year: the United States (Selman 2007).

The United States

While Americans conducted intra-family international adoptions before 1945, the formal roots of American reception lay in the nation's mid to late twentieth century post-war efforts: Japanese and European orphans were adopted by Americans after World War II; Korean orphans, many born of American military personnel, became members of *new* American families after the Korean War; and Vietnamese children were airlifted and adopted into the U.S. before the fall of Saigon in 1975. Significantly, while the number of international adoptions by Americans has grown exponentially in the last thirty years, paternalism is no longer the foundation of American participation. Since the 1980's, international adoption has been re-conceptualized as one solution to American infertility and childlessness (Altstein and Simon 1991).

Although frequently characterized as a private issue, infertility or childlessness is also one of gendered origins and ramifications. For example, infertility has long been defined as a female problem, with women bearing the brunt of medical diagnoses, treatments, and the stigma of "failure" within a pronatalist framework. Equally gendered are many of the social reasons women experience infertility; particularly working women's efforts to delay childbearing due to the limits of maternity leave, affordable childcare, and co-parenting support (Rothman 1989).

Also interesting is how pro-feminist changes in U.S. society have encouraged Americans' international adoptions. Due to women's increased access to birth control and safe/legal abortions, and growing social/cultural support for single motherhood, the number of healthy (White) infants available for domestic adoption in the U.S. has declined since 1970 (Beribetsky 2000). Consequently, just as many middle-class American women began to experience a heightened need for adoptable children, the working-class American women from whom children were historically adopted began to experience greater access to the means to stave off pregnancy or raise the children born to them.

Intersections of class and gender pervade Americans' international adoption pursuits. For example, the decision to adopt internationally must be considered in the context of an increasingly open American adoption environment, where private adoptions might bring adoptive mothers into ongoing, classed relationships with their children's birthmothers. Additionally, American women often draw on gendered middle-class ideologies when adopting internationally; frequently linking motherhood to self-completion (Anagnost 2000) and the plight of orphan girls in patriarchal societies to their potential in the feminist West (Dorow 2006b).

Gender and race also commingle in American international adoption: estimates indicate that approximately 90-percent of American international adopters are White while 60-percent of international adoptees are non-White (Pertman 2000). Yet, while largely transracial in nature, American international adoptions do *not* typically bring White Americans and Black foreign orphans together as family. Thus, many argue that American international adoptions cannot be divorced from the backdrop of a domestic foster care system in which African-American

boys/young men are disproportionately represented and feared (e.g., Dorow 2006a). While most Americans – for reasons ranging from the gender of the initiating parent to traditional ideas about genetic connectedness and daughters' elder-care – prefer to adopt girls (Kirk 1964), this is particularly true of international adopters (Adamec and Pierce 2000); many of whom also believe that female Asian adoptees will have an easier time managing adoptive and ethno-racial minority status in the U.S. (Rothman 2005).

Gendered Identity Negotiations: International Adoptees

But does the experience of American international adoptees, the orphans in this forced migration to the U.S., differ by gender? While most studies of international adoption support the phenomenon (e.g., Simon and Alstein 2000), others indicate that male adoptees *are* disproportionately burdened by their various minority positionings (Grotevant, et al. 2000). In fact, adoption counselors and social workers worry that adoption, as a feminized institution, inherently marginalizes adopted males and their birth and adoptive fathers (Freeark, et al. 2005). For example, international adoption narratives are typically told by, about, and to women and girls: adoptive mothers tend to assume primary responsibility for discussing adoption with their children; birth mothers figure most central in these discussions; and girls/young women are more likely to initiate and participate in these discussions (Freeark, et al. 2005). Thus, it is most often female adoptees that search (Melosh 2002); returning to their “motherland” to discover the birthmothers who, in Western society, did the “unnatural” by un-choosing motherhood (Gailey 2000).

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Resources for Further Information on Adoption/International Adoption

Websites

- Child Welfare Information Gateway (<http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/types/intercountry/>)
- Finding Home: Fifty Years of International Adoption (<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/adoption/>)
- Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (http://www.hcch.net/index_en.php?act=conventions.text&cid=69)
- The Adoption History Project (<http://www.uoregon.edu/~adoption/index.html>)
- The Vietnam Babylift (<http://www.vietnambabylift.org/>)
- U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (<http://www.unicef.org/crc/>)
- U.S. Department of the State, Intercountry Adoption (http://travel.state.gov/family/adoption/adoption_485.html)

Advocacy Organizations

- Also-Known-As, Inc. (<http://www.alsoknownas.org/>)
- Bastard Nation: The Adoptee Rights Organization (<http://www.bastards.org/>)
- Concerned United Birthparents (CUB) (<http://www.cubirthparents.org/>)
- Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (<http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/index.php>)
- Families with Children from China (<http://www.fwcc.org/>)
- Families with Children from Vietnam (<http://www.fcvn.org/>)
- Joint Council on International Children's Services (<http://www.jcics.org/>)
- Korean Adoptee Adoptive Family Network (KAAN) (<http://www.kaanet.com/>)

Teaching Applications

- Daughter from Danang (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/daughter/tguide/index.html>)
- Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (<http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/proed/educators.html>)
- Expanding East Asian Studies: Transnational Adoption (<http://www.exeas.org/resources/category-diasporas.html>)
- First Person Plural (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2000/firstpersonplural/education.html>)
- The Korean Americans: Korean American Adoptees (<http://www.apa.si.edu/Curriculum%20Guide%20Final/>)

Movies/Documentaries/Television Broadcasts

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| <i>Adopted</i> . 2008. | <i>Orphans of Romania</i> . 1990. |
| <i>Baby Business</i> . 1995. | <i>Precious Cargo</i> . 2001. |
| <i>Casa de los Babys</i> . 2003. | <i>Redwood Curtain</i> . 1995. |
| <i>Catfish in Black Bean Sauce</i> . 1999. | <i>Resilience</i> . 2008. |
| <i>China's Lost Girls</i> . 2004. | <i>Searching for Go-Hyang</i> . 1998. |
| <i>China's Stolen Children</i> . 2007. | <i>The Darker Side of Adoption: The Perfect Child</i> . 2000. |
| <i>Daughter from Danang</i> . 2002. | <i>The Dying Rooms</i> . 1995. |
| <i>First Person Plural</i> . 2000. | <i>The Italian</i> . 2006. |
| <i>Found in China</i> . 2007. | <i>The Red String</i> . 2005. |
| <i>Going Home</i> . 2008. | <i>Unlocking the Heart of Adoption</i> . 2002. |