



Discussion

Alternatives to international adoption: Emotional issues in the Korean cultural context



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ABSTRACT

International adoption has been a significant part of South Korea's response to displaced or unwanted children since the 1960s. This paper discusses the growing concern prompted by Korea's continuing reliance on international adoption, and highlights the emerging range of alternative options for children's care. The paper explores the impact of traditional Korean cultural values on public attitudes toward adoption and adopted children, and contrasts Korea's current government policies and placement programs with those in Australia, where adoption occurs only rarely.

Among the alternative forms of care currently being promoted in Korea are domestic adoption, foster care, congregate care and youth-headed households. The discussion includes an overview of their advantages and limitations, and their prospects for future expansion.

The paper concludes by highlighting a number of key measures that need to be addressed in Korea if the current alternatives to international adoption are to be successful. The authors argue that it is well within Korea's capability to initiate change and implement programs inside its own national boundaries to provide effective care and services to its vulnerable children.

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1. Introduction

South Korea is one of the world's economic powerhouses and a member of the OECD. Yet, unusually among OECD countries, Korea permits the international (also termed intercountry) adoption of its children. Why does this practice continue despite the relative wealth and social opportunity offered within Korea? This question is often raised by child welfare advocates and social commentators in Western countries including Korea itself, many of whom are concerned both with the issues that international adoption presents for children and families, and the impact that the practice has on Korea's national image.

International adoption from Korea began in the 1960s, initiated by American Christians, who sought to place children orphaned by the Korean War into U.S. families. Since that time, it is estimated that Korea has sent more than 150,000 children to live with families in the United States, Australia and other Western nations. The practice has been sustained by demand for babies among couples whose own countries often enforce strict guidelines regulating adoption and who, consequently, are willing to adopt children from Korea and from other nations (Choy, 2007; Gray, 2007).

In 1961, the Korean Government appointed a number of agencies to facilitate the process of placing children with foreign families. Over the years, the practice of international adoption has played a key role in meeting the needs of orphaned, abandoned or vulnerable children in Korea. The 'sending' organizations have included International Social Service, Child Placement Service, Catholic Relief Services and Holt Services, among others (Hübinette, 2005; Sarri, Baik, & Bombyk, 1998), and the collective efforts of these agencies have resulted in tens of thousands of children finding adoptive parents and stable homes abroad.

However, in recent times international adoption has been subject to increasing criticism both from within Korea and from other Western countries. By the 1970s, the nation's increasing wealth was seen to be at odds with its policy of using international adoption as a method to care for children needing out of home placements (Hübinette, 2005). The Korean Government has come under growing pressure to take other appropriate measures to provide for the welfare of displaced children (Sarri et al., 1998), while critics have encouraged Korean families to pursue domestic adoption alternatives.

Nevertheless, there are a number of issues currently affecting Korean policy on international adoption which require consideration, including the structuring of programs offered by social and educational institutions, and the impact of Korean cultural values and the attitudes of the wider international community. The cessation of international adoption requires a multi-dimensional approach designed to address these issues, and their likely impacts in wider Korean society.

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2. Critical issues regarding international adoption

Child welfare advocates have long been critical of the Korean Government's stance on international adoption, arguing that it has relied on overseas adoption to take care of displaced children in lieu of developing its own child welfare programs. Since the early 1970s, the Korean Government has responded by attempting to develop strategies aimed at reducing the number of international adoptions. Most recently, the Government has been earnestly promoting alternatives such as domestic adoption, kinship foster care, group home care, and youth-headed household programs (Kim & Henderson, 2008, p. 22) ahead of a moratorium on international adoption that Korea has set for 2015.

Ending international adoption is nevertheless attended by some significant challenges that include economic impacts on agencies which currently rely on income from adoption to sustain domestic welfare programs. Some agencies use income from adoption to provide financial support for foster mothers caring for infants, providing all food, clothing and other supplies free of charge. Currently, three agencies run homes for single or indigent mothers as well as operating their own orphanages. These agencies also cover the costs of delivery and medical care for women who give their babies up for adoption.

Of course, the welfare services that any nation provides for its children are dependent on the values held within its communities. Despite the high value that Koreans place on children's welfare and the sympathy expressed toward children and families facing difficult circumstances, public attitudes toward domestic adoption have traditionally been negative. Korean society continues to be strongly influenced by Confucian, family-centered cultural values that place significant emphasis on paternal family ties and bloodlines. Within this cultural context, many Koreans are highly conscious of family lineages and often feel uncomfortable with children who are not biologically related to their parents or carers.

Adoption within Korea therefore comes with a great deal of stigma attached. Prejudicial feelings are often expressed toward orphans, often in the belief that the children have come from disadvantaged circumstances and consequently present with developmental challenges. Historically, many Koreans have, in fact, struggled to be open-minded toward adoption and many people have tended to view adoption as a source of shame or a secret to be kept. Those Korean families who do choose to adopt children are typically couples unable to bear children of their own (Bai, 1998; Kim & Henderson, 2008). Yet, even in these circumstances, it is not uncommon for adoptive parents to take infants of less than 5 months old, so that children can be passed off as their natural offspring. Consequently, despite the widespread embrace of Western practices and cultural values in Korea, attitudes toward adoption nationally are still influenced by long-held prejudices and reluctance, and a high level of self-consciousness about family identity.

3. The historical context for child welfare in Australia

Historically, legislation, policies and practice in child welfare in Australia indicate a markedly different trajectory from those in Korea. Child placement was influenced by a Victorian philanthropic response to children, in particular those who were orphaned, or vagrant. It was their plight that inspired the development of the 19th century children's charities (Scott & Swain, 2002). From early European settlement in Australia, young children were identified as being in need as a result of their parents being dead, incarcerated or 'insane' (Liddell p. 30 in Goddard & Carew, 1993). The initial response in Australia to meet the need was an early form of foster care where children were boarded out to 'approved families'. Boarding out practices continued throughout the 1800s. However they could not meet the identified need to place children and in 1851 the first of many large institutions to house children, the Melbourne Orphan Asylum, opened its doors. A number of these institutions were run by voluntary organizations, with a pattern of government subsidy for voluntary services established at that time. In 1864

Victoria proclaimed its first child neglect legislation and in what reflected a shift toward government responsibility for child welfare, the Victorian Children's Court was established in the 1890s (Liddell, in Goddard & Carew, 1993). These developments were not dissimilar to those in Britain and North America, and were consistent with those of other Australian states and territories; with each developing its own legislative framework and systems. The prevailing ideology in these times was unequivocally one of blame, punishment and child rescue. Thus,

'the child in need of welfare assistance was regarded as the victim of an immoral and socially inadequate family situation, and implementation of welfare policy usually resulted in the child being segregated from his family' (Picton & Boss, 1981, p. 21) Child welfare generally focused on young orphans, youth offenders and on the 'morality of their parents' (Liddell, p36 in Goddard & Carew, 1993).

The early 20th century saw a period where legislative and bureaucratic systems were developed with the Victorian Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children established in 1896; its successor the Children's Protection Society became the voluntary agency with a legal mandate to investigate reports of child abuse and neglect in Victoria, one of Australia's larger states (Scott & Swain, 2002). A key feature of the 20th century, along with the century preceding it, was the systematic removal of Aboriginal children from their families, who were subsequently placed into institutional care or with European families to be 'taught' European ways (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997). The prevailing ideology of this forced removal was one which had the same punitive and child rescue flavor as that identified earlier, adding an insidious form of racist belief in the supremacy of European child rearing practices (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997; Tilbury, Osmand, Wilson, & Clark, 2007).

The 1950s saw the beginning of experiments across Australia to close large institutions caring for children and development of smaller 'group home' and home-based care. This movement accelerated in the 1960s with the non-government services described as being in the 'van-guard' of this movement (Goddard & Carew, 1993). A 'wave' of child rescue took place throughout Australia from the 1960s, known as the 'battered baby' syndrome (Scott & Swain, 2002). As a result of new radiological survey technique, untreated evidence of bone fractures in children provided evidence of physical abuse that had not been previously available in such a conclusive form. The syndrome was defined as 'a clinical condition in young children who have received serious physical abuse (and) a frequent cause of permanent injury' (Kempe et al., 1962 in Scott & Swain, 2002, p. 121).

The numbers of children coming to the attention of agencies requiring placement away from their families increased in the 1960s and 1970s, with the 1980s described as a 'watershed in the (re) discovery of child sexual abuse in Australia' (Scott & Swain, 2002, p. 154) with reports of sexual abuse consistently rising in that decade.

New legislation was developed throughout the states and territories toward the end of the 20th century. The Children and Young Persons Act, for example, was enacted in Victoria in 1989 and seen as a fresh opportunity to define the grounds upon which the state may intervene in family life, on a conceptual platform of the 'rights' of individual children and their parents. It was also viewed as the means of establishing the concept of 'significant harm'; this concept represented a move away from a more generic 'welfare' orientation, to one which upheld the 'rights' of children and their families (State of Victoria, 1989). An amendment to this Act introduced the mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse in 1993. Notifications rates of suspected abuse soared following this amendment. One estimate of the increased reporting rate described the overall increase as 55% by August 1994, some 'seven times what had been anticipated prior to mandatory reporting being introduced' (Swain, 1998). This context, one of growing demand for child protection and placement services served as the foundation for the modern child welfare system throughout Australia.

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