

MOTHER COLUMBIA AND UNCLE SAM

Transnational Korean Adoption as a Form of Cold War Soft Power

Abstract: In the aftermath of the Korean War, American couples and families across the nation mobilized to provide homes for Korea's newly orphaned population. Although largely driven by humanitarian concern, the transnational adoption of Korean children also held strategic value for America's post-war foreign policy objectives and international prestige. This article examines the mechanisms through which the United States harnessed the symbolic power of Korean adoptees and attempts to place this particular wave of transnational adoption within an explanatory ideological framework.

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When the Korean War came to a close in July 1953, forces on both sides of the 38th parallel suffered 1.8 million casualties.¹ Although a staggering statistic in and of itself, the casualty rate alone does not speak to the equally tragic impact of the war on Korea's children. An estimated 100,000 Korean children, either the children of the deceased or children separated from their parents in the confusion of war, found themselves alone on the streets or in orphanages.² The response to this humanitarian crisis was transformed into an impetus for both the symbolic and actual emergence of transnational Korean adoption by predominantly white American couples.

From the humble beginnings of Holt International in Eugene, Oregon, to the cumulative adoption of over 200,000 Korean children by North American, Western European, and Australian families since 1953, transnational Korean adoption has long-served to reproduce paternalistic relationships and political involvement in South Korea by its Western allies, particularly the United States. Through a coordinated system of propagandized images, mass media representations, and a reductive ideology of globalized ethics, Korean adoptees came to concurrently symbolize and depoliticize the interdependency of Korea and the United States throughout the 1950s and into the Cold War.³ In a phenomenon that is best explained through an intersecting lens of military humanitarianism and Cold War Orientalism, the juxtaposition of the images of the benevolent American adoptive parent and the innocent Korean war waif made Korean-American relations more palatable while providing a focal point for righteous outrage against presupposed communist aggression.

GOOD GUY, BAD GUY: MILITARY HUMANITARIANISM

In the aftermath of the Korean War, the perception of the United States' presence in Korea and in the broader international community was very much in flux. Partially as a response to this phenomenon, and partially out of a necessity created by its own troops' sexual activity while deployed, the United States engaged in a policy of military humanitarianism in South Korea.⁴ Military humanitarianism,⁵ in broad terms, refers to a doctrine in which

military intervention is dressed up as humanitarian salvation, justified according to depoliticized, universal human rights, such that anyone who opposes it is not only taking the enemy's side in an armed conflict but betraying the international community of civil[n]ations.⁶

The United States' post-war military occupation of South Korea was comprised of activities directed toward both nation building and national branding. The pure and hopeful image of the rescued Korean child functioned as the obvious symbolic choice for this dual mission, while transnational adoption served as the vehicle through which the intended parent-child relationship between the American military and the Korean people could be miniaturized and replicated at home.

By the time the United States brought the Korean child into its foreign policy schematic in East Asia, he or she was already a familiar trope and psychological bargaining chip from the preceding Korean War. Leaflets designed by the U.S. Army's Psychological Warfare Division often associated United Nations forces with domestic contentment in an Americanized style. One such leaflet, part of a "Defection



U.S. Government leaflet attempting to demoralize Chinese enemy in Korean War by showing how their families missed them back home (1953)

Source: Federal Government (Wikimedia Commons)

Bandwagon” series, depicted three contrasting panels of life under communism and life under the United Nations, with captions like “Useless Death” and “Happy Life” placed side by side.⁷ Two of the three United Nations panels, captioned with “A Normal Future” and “A Happy Home,” show images of a jocular two-parent, two-child family embracing one another and holding hands as they walk through a village.⁸ That the image of normality communicated to the Korean people is the nuclear, middle-class family of American ideals is particularly telling. With little consideration for how family might be understood in Korean culture, American propaganda sought to export domestic familial ideas abroad while obscuring any notable differences in the American and Korean construction of this most basic societal unit.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, American wartime propaganda sought to create quite the opposite association between communism and the familial paragon. One particularly striking Psychological Warfare Division leaflet from 1952 features an image of a crying mother looking out woefully over the countryside as she tries to comfort a screaming baby in her arms.⁹ As emotionally and symbolically loaded as this warped Madonna is, it pales in comparison to the poem printed on the reverse. Meant to be sung in “jingle form,” the poem informs the baby that the “devilish Chinese may intrude into our house and...may violate your mother.”¹⁰ This portrayal of a starving child at risk of witnessing his mother’s sexual assault is as strategic as it is harrowing, casting the communist way of life as monstrous toward the most vulnerable and antithetical to a wholesome family and childhood. Such imagery likely conditioned Korean parents to view their country as inherently unsafe for their children while engendering a sense of righteous responsibility among Americans for the traumatized and victimized children of Korea. The stage thus set, the plight of Korean

children and the communist assault on the Americanized family ethic, whether real or imagined, was already accessible to the collective American awareness prior to the institutionalization of Korean adoption.

The United States was not immune to this powerful hyperbole, nor was it able to fully dominate the dispersion of such narratives. In an inversion of the United States’ own rhetoric, communist countries accused the United States of unimaginable cruelty and callousness toward its child victims in proxy wars and occupations. Under Kim Il-Sung, broadcasts out of Pyongyang labelled America-backed South Korea as a land of unspeakable horrors, where “South Korean youth were killed as cheaper cannon fodder and many women and children were slaughtered.”¹¹ The victimization of mothers and children at the hands of Americans was echoed in the rhetorical strategies of China, the Soviet Union, and various satellite countries as they attempted to woo non-aligned nations to the communist camp. Xinhua News Agency, the official state-run press outlet of China, reported that Korea was a land of orphans, where “every child has a tragic history.”¹² The American and United Nations forces responsible for the murder of the orphans’ parents stood in sharp contrast to Chinese army men “[carrying] children on their backs from south of the 38th Parallel.”¹³ Characterized as indiscriminate killers with an open secret of human rights violations, the symbolic American soldier could be easily transformed from the World War II-era beacon of hope to a calling card for imperial intentions and brutality.

The Soviet Union, China, North Korea, and other communist countries also leveraged the image of the child in their critiques of actions and attitudes inherent to the American racial hierarchy. A number of historians and scholars have explicated on the relationship between American race relations and Cold War geopolitics, particularly those designed to win over non-white nations of the Global South.¹⁴ Segregated spaces, Jim Crow laws, structural poverty and social immobility in black communities, and public lynchings coalesced into an effective argument against aligning with the United States, one so deeply persuasive that Secretary of State Dean Acheson referred to America’s racial system as “a source of constant embarrassment” that “jeopardized effective maintenance of [American] moral leadership of the free and democratic nations of the world.”¹⁵ Acheson’s recognition of the need for visible “moral leadership” as a crucial element of Cold War strategy, as opposed to only military or economic leadership, was a significant step toward fully embracing military humanitarianism. The Korean child would later prove to be an effective canvas on which to project Acheson’s vision.

In a more tangible sense, the issue of so-called “GI Babies” in South Korea was another significant blow to the American military’s reputation abroad and an obstacle to achieving the Armed Forces Assistance to Korea’s goal of producing the



North Korean refugees on board a U.S. Navy fast transport, U.S. Navy photo 80-G-K-14209 (1952)
 Source: U.S Navy, "Operation Fishnet," Korea, (Wikimedia Commons)

“realization by Koreans and other free peoples of the nature of [American] intentions.”¹⁶ While it is difficult to ascertain the total number of GI babies born during American occupation in Korea, inferences can be drawn from the sheer number of personnel involved: six million American soldiers served in Korea between 1950 and 1971, while up to one million Korean women provided sexual services for American military “camps” during this period.¹⁷ Whether conceived via genuine relationships between American soldiers and Korean women or via prostitution and exploitation, GI babies represented a complex legal issue and an even more challenging social issue. Babies born to American fathers and Korean mothers often lacked citizenship in both of their parents’ native countries and, worse still, faced permanent social stigma and rejection in Korea. Not unlike the United States at this time, Korean society emphasized racial purity and actively discriminated against these so-called “t’wigi,” or “half-breed,” children.¹⁸ In the context of emerging American neocolonialism in South Korea, GI babies also functioned as a permanent and highly visible symbol of a weak and effeminate Korea, forced to exchange its racial and national independence for American protection.

To aid in the reparation of the American military’s reputation in Korea and elsewhere, the United States’ governmental and military agencies relied on transnational adoption to resurrect the powerful ideology of what historian Karen Dubinsky refers to as “hybrid babies.”¹⁹ The hybrid babies first emerged as a categorical

and symbolic child among white adoptive parents in the United States, Canada, and other economically dominant nations immediately following World War II. Civic society campaigns urged the adoption of multiracial children fathered by Allied troops, particularly those fathered by black American soldiers, from Germany and elsewhere. These children came to represent “a hopeful sign of cross racial tolerance, unfortunate[s] to be rescued by tender white care, or a...measure of superior social values,” with little recognition of the political and economic factors that created their circumstances.²⁰ The hybrid child served as a useful platform on which to build when leveraging Korean orphans, who could expand the American racial lexicon to include Asian, black-Asian, and other heretofore peripheral lineages while reinforcing a broad-based view of American society’s universality and plurality. Unlike his communist equivalents and his peers in the Republic of Korea, the American soldier, backed by progressive values at home, could reach across racial and national lines for the good of innocents.

The benevolent American soldier and his non-white charge, however, could only be of use in American brand-building and anti-communist strategies if imagery of the two could be effectively communicated to the public. Though it would be overly simplistic to condense this mass undertaking into a single distributive channel, it would also be amiss to minimize the role of the so-called “middlebrow” media in repackaging and disseminating a sterilized image of military-enabled transnational Korean adoption. The

term “middlebrow” was first introduced in America in a 1926 *New York Times* article, but it was not until the post-World War II era that it fully emerged in tandem with a burgeoning American middle class. The cultural and societal understanding of what constitutes “middlebrow” is fluid, but Russell Lynes’ description of the quintessential middlebrow vision as

the typical American family - happy little women, happy little children, all spotless or sticky in the jam pot, framed against dimity curtains in the windows or decalomania flowers on the cupboard doors...a world pictured without tragedy...a world that smells of soap

does it sufficient justice.²¹ This image of the wholesome, child-centric nuclear family, fully shielded from the messiness of the outside world by American materialism and relative wealth, permeated American broadcasts, entertainment, literature, and periodicals. It provided a perfect venue in which to acquaint domestic audiences and international consumers of American culture with the new American soldier and the repurposed Korean child.

One need look no further than popular coffee table magazines of the 1950s to observe the ubiquity of the American heroism message with respect to Korean children. A 1953 article in *Collier's*, for example, encapsulates the essentialism of the American gentle giant motif as it relates to the individual soldier and international opinion of the nation. Written shortly after the Korean War armistice officially took effect, the article details the heroics of American Sergeant First Class Werner Kranzer, who spent his free time on deployment rescuing Korean orphans from the street and bringing them to a United Nations center, from which many were sent to

charged with the task of rehabilitating and reintroducing its troops to the world in the wake of the Korean War. Transnational adoption of Korean children, particularly adoption enabled by American soldiers’ selfless rescue efforts, emerged as a critical method through which to effect this change. By participating in such endeavors, among other relief-centered campaigns, the American soldier acted as less of an expression of his country’s military might and more of a de facto ambassador for American altruism and moral superiority. Having already been used as a familiar and emotionally-charged figure in the Soviet-American battle for narrative dominance, the Korean child was symbolically redesigned as a central beneficiary and activating mechanism of American military humanitarianism.

“LIVING DOLLS”: COLD WAR ORIENTALISM

While military humanitarianism had implications for, and effects on, the American people, its primary audience was the global community, particularly those countries thought to be in danger of falling into the communist sphere of influence. At home, the United States relied on various branches of civic society and social impulse to increase acceptance of ongoing American involvement in the Korean Peninsula after a fairly unpopular, or at least undesirable, war. Between 1951 and 1953, the percentage of Americans that disapproved of the Korean War, despite some volatility, remained significant. In February 1951, 49% of Americans believed the United States “made a mistake going into war in Korea.”²³ The percentage increased slightly to 50% in February 1952 and, even at its lowest point in January 1953, accounted for over one-third of the American public.²⁴ Over two decades later, as reported by *The Wilson Quarterly*, retrospective approval of the Korean

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orphanages and later adopted abroad. The “quiet, sensitive sergeant [who] collects waifs ... [from] the small-fry underworld” is hailed as the consummate American, even more so because he voluntarily enlisted for another year of service in Korea because “there [was] too much to do.”²² In Kranzer, one can see an attempt to reclaim American exceptionalism and recast it not only in terms of masculine strength, but also in a construct of feminine compassion. Kranzer is metaphorically both mother and father to the Korean children he rescues, just as the United States wished to be viewed by a dependent South Korea.

Disturbed by the American soldier’s fall from grace in the global moral imagination, the United States Department of State and Armed Forces Assistance to Korea, or AFAK, were

War stood at only 36%.²⁵ General knowledge of Asia was also lacking, with journalist and author Harold Isaacs asserting in his book, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India*, that “vagueness about Asia had been the natural condition even of the educated American.”²⁶ For the Eisenhower Administration’s multifactor anti-communism strategy, however, domestic support was critical. This necessitated a jolt to the collective American conscience and awareness, which seemed to be fairly blase about the Korean War, its representative significance, and Asian peoples in general.

In his speech on the occasion of the Korean War Armistice in July 1953, President Eisenhower laid out two distinct elements that would soon form the basis of American attitudes toward



A war weary Korean girl trudges by a stalled M-26 tank (1951)
 Source: Maj. R V. Spencer, *National Archives and Records Administration* (Wikimedia Commons)

Korea in a post-war world. First and foremost, Eisenhower emphasized the possibility of a natural and strong alignment between the United States and its pockets of allyship in East Asia, commenting that “men of the East and men of the West can fight and work and live side by side in pursuit of a just and noble cause.”²⁷ Concurrently, though, Eisenhower reinforced the otherness of Korea and the Korean people, referring to the country as “that faroff land” for which many American families had sacrificed.²⁸

The juxtaposition of these two conceptual frameworks, in which Korea was at once within and without the locus of the American community and imagination, persisted throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s. Of particular interest is the way in which it fed into an emerging foreign policy framework that historian Christina Klein refers to as “Cold War Orientalism.” Building on previous definitions of a broader Orientalism, Klein defines Cold War Orientalism as the process by which “middlebrow intellectuals and Washington policymakers produced a sentimental discourse of integration that imagined the forging of bonds between Asians and Americans both at home and abroad.”²⁹ Although Klein cites literary and cultural works like *The King and I* and *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* as the dominant medium through which Cold War Orientalism was expressed, there were arguably also active, rather than consumptive, modes through which Cold War Orientalism manifested. Transnational Korean adoption by American families, particularly white Christian families, was one such mode.

Central to the confluence of Cold War Orientalism and transnational adoption stood Henry and Bertha Holt, the first known American couple to adopt children from Korea and the founders of what is now known as Holt International. After participating in a child sponsorship program to provide

funding for the care of Korean orphans, the Holts formally adopted eight Korean children into their Oregon home and subsequently arranged for hundreds of other couples to do the same. From a structural legal perspective, the physical process by which the Holts first adopted from Korea is critical to understand the larger paradigm of transnational Korean adoption. For example, it was only through a special act of the United States Congress in June 1955, officially entitled “A Bill for Relief of Certain War Orphans” but better known as “The Holt Bill,” that the Holts were able to bring children from Korea to the United States. The bill allowed for their adoptive Korean children to be naturalized before reaching the United States.³⁰ The willingness of Congress to carve out such an exception to overarching immigration policies and theories is quite significant and exemplifies the partnership between policymakers and agents of the middlebrow that was so crucial to the perpetuation of Cold War Orientalism.

Second, the Holts and those for whom they eventually coordinated Korean adoptions made use of proxy adoption, through which parents adopted children sight unseen via non-governmental agents already in Korea. The children would then be flown to an airport on the West Coast, where they would meet their new family for the first time.³¹ In addition to concerns about the welfare of children adopted in this fashion and the fitness of those by whom they were adopted, proxy adoption essentially removed Korean families and birth parents from the adoption equation while distancing the American government from the process and any associated liability. Furthermore, proxy adoption commodified the Korean child, treating him or her as no different than the child in the orphanage’s next bed and essentially interchangeable in the eyes of his or her soon-to-be American parents. Indeed, a witness to the disembarking of 107 Korean adoptees from the Holts’ “Flying Tiger” airplane noted that the infants had traveled in white cardboard boxes with holes cut into either end “to enable the boxes to be stacked one above the other.”³² The Korean child as a product, rather than as a person, was an unfortunate, but not uncommon, trope among adoptive parents and their supporters.

Exoticism, both positive and negative, was utilized extensively by Holts and other proponents of Korean adoption in American civic society. For the Holts and other Christian individuals and organizations that figured prominently in the spread of Cold War Orientalism, Korea was exoticized not as a foreign curiosity, but as a dystopia hidden from God’s salvific light. In her recollection of the events that led to the adoption of her eight Korean children, Bertha Holt, known as “Grandma Holt” by prominent politicians and average Americans alike, promulgated anecdotes of Korean orphans found in Army dumps, recognizable only as “a human form beneath garbage and flies...beneath grime and indescribable dirt.”³³ Her memoir is rife with further references to Korea as a hellscape for its most vulnerable, such as her and her husband’s heartache at the thought of “those poor little babies starving to death, or being thrown into dumps to be gnawed by rats.”³⁴

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Holt's disquieting imagery was profoundly important for forging the "sentimental bonds" of Cold War Orientalism and engendering in the compassionate American a sense of moral responsibility to rescue the Korean people. While this type of affective exposure fulfilled the mission of gaining support and resource mobilization for the ongoing American occupation of Korea, it failed to acknowledge America's role in bringing about these circumstances. Self-blame thus removed, Americans were free to channel their emotional labor into sympathizing with South Koreans and promoting a blanket hatred of communist influence.

The inverse of Bertha Holt's dystopian exoticism came in the form of an equally impactful strain of civic religion with Christian features, largely popularized by Harry Holt and spread by those for whom the Holts had secured adoptees. In a notable contrast to the suffering child of his wife's narrative, the Korean child of Harry Holt's imagination was a child of God no different than the biological Christian children to whom adoptive parents had already given birth. In his letter to supporters and potential adoptive parents, Holt, after expressing gratitude to televangelist Billy Graham for his work on behalf of Korean orphans, implored recipients to "pray to God that He will give us the wisdom and the strength and the power to deliver His

for the Korean and American people. Echoing America's perception of a protector-protectee relationship, author and adoptive father Jan de Hartog monolithically described Korean and other Asian adoptees as obedient "little Mr. Chinatown[s]" and "miniature Doctor Fu Manchu[s]."³⁶ In order to be fully invited into the individual and national American family, Korean adoptees were required to fit into the appropriate relational role established by the aforementioned perspective of the American soldier overseas.

Whether intentionally or not, adoptive parents often applied to their adopted Korean daughters the stereotypical subservient sexual roles assigned to Korean women in and around American camptowns in South Korea. When asked what characteristics she would be looking for in a child, one adoptive mother recalled that her first response asked for "someone exotic and beautiful."³⁷ de Hartog drew the sexualized female paradigm even further, writing,

Many fathers of little girls may be similarly enslaved, but I suspect that little Korean girls are the experts at this form of lion-taming. Like all women from countries where the male rules the roost, they have the magic power of making our breeches drop at the crest of our strutting self-confidence.³⁸

“Korean transnational adoption was less of an altruistic effort than it was a powerful tool in a broader strategy to construct, or perhaps reconstruct, Korea in the American mind.”

little children from the cold and misery and darkness of Korea into the warmth and love of your homes.”³⁵ Holt's view of transnational adoption was less about successfully crossing racial and national boundaries and more about uniting God's family in the United States, understood in this context as the closest substitute for the heavenly utopia of the Judeo-Christian theological tradition. With such a perspective, Holt and other adoptive parents collapsed into their adopted Korean children a complex syncretism of American exceptionalism, elements of preordainment from a globalized Manifest Destiny, and a Christian family ethic.

It is important to note that Cold War Orientalism did not apply only to Korean orphans living in Korea. Instead, the mindset followed these children long after they had arrived on American soil to become part of their adoptive families. Every facet of the Korean adoptee, from his or her physical appearance to the way in which he or she assimilated into his or her American family, was scrutinized, stereotyped, and regurgitated as evidence of the integrationist possibilities

Korean adoption, then, was not a union of equals, but a carefully orchestrated reproduction of geopolitical Korean-American relation on an individual scale, with the Korean adoptee expected to neatly fulfill American fantasies and power dynamics.

When viewed through the lens of Cold War Orientalism, Korean transnational adoption was less of an altruistic effort than it was a powerful tool in a broader strategy to construct, or perhaps reconstruct, Korea in the American mind. Images of a remote land of little interest to America or an ineffectual country siphoning American treasure and troops were replaced by a vague notion of a charity nation in need of American assistance. Rallied behind this hazy cause, individual Americans were inspired to adopt Korean children as a demonstration of their anti-communist and pro-South Korea attitudes. A tremendous amount of emotional, cultural, and narrative labor was expended in an effort to simplify integrationist foreign policy goals into a symbolically binary choice between rescuing and abandoning a Korean child.

A NOTE ON KOREAN AGENCY

It is critical to note that South Korea was not an entirely passive player in the emerging 1950s phenomena of transnational Korean adoption. South Korean and American policy often worked hand-in-hand to enable the flow of children between the two countries, and the combination of South Korea's economic development goals and aforementioned racial politics set the backdrop for national participation in a broader adoption scheme. The idiosyncrasies of the sitting South Korean government's strategic goals, rather than any particular theory of social welfare, had the greatest influence on Korean adoption policy. In 1976, for example, Park Chung Hee's administration implemented the Five-Year Plan for Adoption and Foster Care amidst stringent criticism from North Korea, which accused South Korea of selling children to foreign imperialists and enemies. The plan called for specific annual reductions in foreign adoptions, annual increases in domestic adoption, and a more restrictive list of countries to which Korean children could be sent.³⁹

While Park's intentions may or may not have included greater protection for his nation's children, the Five-Year Plan for Adoption and Foster Care fit squarely within Park's national *yushin* ideology. In addition to its authoritarian domestic elements, *yushin* included reformatory efforts with respect to North-South relations and increasing South Korean autonomy in the face of American influence and in-country involvement.⁴⁰ With this governance theory in mind, a reduction in transnational Korean adoption, of which American couples had historically been the primary beneficiary, exported a stronger South Korean image to both North Korea and the United States. Still, Park's policy toward Korean adoption, like the policy of administrations both preceding and succeeding him, were crafted in response to corresponding American intentions, policy, and behavior. Even in decisions regarding its own children, South Korea was relegated to the role of recipient and secondary actor.

To more clearly understand the limited agency of individual South Koreans in the transnational adoption process, rather than that of the macro-level South Korean state, the voices of adoptees brought to America form an important body of evidence. Despite public projections to the contrary, American adoptive parents and the agents and institutions that serviced them possessed a "core anxiety concerning the racial, cultural, national, and biological difference between the adopted child and her adoptive parents."⁴¹ Many adoptee narratives, as logical vehicles for this anxiety, feature the same foundational elements: a certain level of mythology used to justify their initial adoption, attempted normalization, and a persistent, albeit often repressed, sense of otherness.⁴²

Deann Borshay Liem, a Korean adoptee and the acclaimed documentarian behind *First Person Plural*, gives voice to this

"cultural dysphoria" and the harrowing discovery that her identity was switched with that of another child to facilitate her proxy adoption by an American couple.⁴³ Liem's experience of so-called 'orphan switching' was arguably rare, but the mismanagement and even doctoring of South Korean adoption records was not. While few statistics exist in this regard, anecdotal evidence abounds. Years after adopting her daughter, for example, American Maggie Perscheid learned that, contrary to the presented narrative of an unmarried couple giving up their child, her daughter was placed from an "intact family [in South Korea] and had siblings."⁴⁴ Liem and Perscheid's stories have been echoed many times over by members of such adoptee communities as Adoptee Solidarity Korea and Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoption Community of Korea.⁴⁵

Similarly, adoptee Laura Klunder describes herself as "a transaction...a number in the same way that people who are criminalized and institutionalized are given numbers."⁴⁶ Her bond with her adoptive parents aside, Klunder viewed herself as the product of a selfish market exchange system introduced by the United States and unquestioningly accepted by South Korea. Prior to being brought to the United States, Klunder lived with a native Korean foster family in South Korea for over a year. The transnational adoption process ignored this and other potential options for domestic adoption, choosing instead to export Klunder abroad with no acknowledgement of the racism, alienation, and perpetual foreigner stigma that she inevitably faced as the only Korean child in her new Midwestern town.⁴⁷ Klunder's story is one of many that demonstrates the presence of a problematic naivete and a lack of cultural awareness among those who advocated for, facilitated, and benefited from transnational Korean adoption by American families.

CONCLUSION

Though cast as a simple moral decision by generous American couples, the transnational adoption of Korean children in the aftermath of the Korean War reflected a complex system of cultural and social factors jointly leveraged to seek approval and support for ongoing American involvement in the Korean Peninsula. Transnational Korean adoption was an effective method of national brand-building both at home and abroad for the United States. The Korean child, already a familiar symbol in the American imagination, was repackaged to sterilize the nature of American military power in East Asia and emerging neocolonialism in South Korea. Through the Korean adoptee, soldiers became saviors, and the United States became both mother and father to its newly adopted Korean charge south of the 38th parallel.

While it is impossible to encapsulate the depth and breadth of all factors that enabled transnational Korean adoption, it is useful to evaluate this system at the intersection of both military humanitarianism and Cold War Orientalism.

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Transnational Korean adoption was not the first sign of these frameworks active in a Cold War world. It did, however, become a critical element in the ongoing feedback loop of de facto American imperialism, domestic support, and a carefully crafted reputation of benevolence projected to the international community -- particularly non-aligned and developing nations. By leveraging stereotypical tropes of Asian docility and exoticism, a nascent middlebrow media at work in the homes of the middle class, and appeals to a Christianized civic religion, the United States used the image of the Korean child to align its Cold War foreign policy goals with the moral impulses and global ethics of its citizens.

Although South Korea was an active participant in the transnational adoption of its children, it is more accurate to characterize South Korea as a party limited in its agency by overwhelming American influence in its politics, economic reconstruction, and border integrity. The Korean child, in comparison, was stripped of his or her autonomy and pushed into the mold of broader American expectations about what would constitute an ideal adoptee and, by extension, an ideal national dependent. With a significant amount of emotional and narrative labor, an otherwise humanitarian concern was transformed into a normalizing vehicle for American-Korean power dynamics. Quite a burden was placed on little shoulders. 🏛️

Endnotes

[1] Don Oberdorfer and Robert Carlin, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York City: Perseus Books Group, 2014), 8.

[2] "The Children of War," *Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University*, Harvard University, n.d., <https://www.peabody.harvard.edu/node/2433> (accessed November 18, 2018).

[3] While political ideology and the coordinated evolution of immigration and emigration policy in the United States and South Korea are undoubtedly vital elements in understanding transnational Korean adoption, they are beyond the scope of this paper. This analysis will focus mainly on the social and cultural factors that enabled mass adoption of Korean children by predominantly white, Christian families in middle-class America.

[4] Soojin Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S. Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2014), 34.

[5] Pate prefers to use the term "militarized humanitarianism" when discussing the theoretical application to Korea to make clear that military fusion with humanitarian elements is an appropriate process, rather than a new and equal strain of humanitarianism. As there is no shared consensus about which is the more accurate term, this paper will use military humanitarianism. This is the original term coined by Slovenian philosopher and professor Slavoj Žižek.

[6] Slavoj Žižek, "Turkey is a Thorn in the Side of a Cosy Western Consensus," *The Guardian*, October 23, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/oct/23/comment.turkey> (accessed November 18, 2018).

[7] United States Army, "Defection Bandwagon Serial No. 8255: Which One Do You Choose?" Cartoon, *United States Army Psychological Warfare Division* (Fargo: North Dakota State University, 1952).

[8] United States Army, "Defection Bandwagon Serial No. 8255: Which One Do You Choose?" Cartoon, *United States Army Psychological Warfare Division* (Fargo: North Dakota State University,

1952).

[9] Ibid.

[10] United States Army, "Serial No. 8286: Hungry Mother and Child" Cartoon, *United States Army Psychological Warfare Division* (Fargo: North Dakota State University, 1952).

[11] "Poverty, Enslavement Face South Korea," *Pyongyang*, December 14, 1953, translated in *DAILY REPORT FOREIGN RADIO BROADCASTS*, no. FBIS-FRB-53-245, December 17, 1953: EEE16-EEE17, Readex: The Cold War: Global Perspectives on East-West Tensions, 1945-1991.

[12] "Newsman Views Life Of Korean Orphans," *Peking NCNA*, July 14, 1952, translated in *DAILY REPORT FOREIGN RADIO BROADCASTS*, no. FBIS-FRB-52-138, July 15, 1952: EEE5-EEE7, Readex: The Cold War: Global Perspectives on East-West Tensions, 1945-1991.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Arissa H. Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 81-82.

[15] Qtd. in Ibid.

[16] Qtd. in Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*, 35.

[17] Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 50.

[18] Ibid, 51.

[19] Karen Dubinsky, "Babies Without Borders: Rescue, Kidnap, and the Symbolic Child," *Journal of Women's History* 19, no. 1 (2007): 142.

[20] Ibid, 143-144.

[21] Russell Lynes, "Highbrow, Middlebrow, Lowbrow (Reprint)," *The Wilson Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1976): 157.

[22] Marvin Koner, "Korea's Children: The Old in Heart," *Collier's*, July 25, 1953, 27.

[23] Steve Crabtree, "The Gallup Brain: Americans and the Korean War," *Gallup*, Gallup, February 4, 2003, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/7741/gallup-brain-americans-korean-war.aspx> (accessed March 23, 2019).

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