Article

Korean Adoption to Australia as Quiet and Orderly Child Migration

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Abstract: Approximately 3600 Korean children have been adopted to Australia, as of 2023. Existing studies have tended to approach transnational or intercountry adoption from child development, social welfare, or identity perspectives. Research on Korean adoption to Australia is relatively scarce. The current article approaches the population from a migration perspective, building on Richard Weil’s conceptualization of transnational adoption as “quiet migration.” Drawing on both Korean-language data from South Korean governments and Australian data, the authors analyse Korean adoption to Australia as a state-sanctioned transnational migratory mechanism that facilitated the orderly movement of children from so-called “deficient” families of predominantly single mothers in South Korea to adoptive families in Australia. Situating adoption practices within the socio-political contexts and larger migration trends of both countries, the authors identify multiple enabling factors for channelling the ‘quiet’ flow of Korean children for adoption and argue the very ‘quietness’ of the adoption system is a source of concern despite Australia’s relatively stringent regulations. A migration perspective and analysis of these enabling factors contributes to the conceptualization of adoption as a socio-political state-sanctioned phenomenon, rather than a solely private family affair.

Keywords: transnational adoption; intercountry adoption; Korea; Australia; quiet migration; orderly migration

1. Introduction

Peter Selman (2002, 2015) estimates that approximately one million children have been transnationally adopted since the end of WWII. Despite fluctuations and an overall decline since the 1980s, the South Korean (hereafter Korean) program remains the longest-running modern adoption program and has resulted in the largest cohort of transnationally adopted persons globally. Studies on transnational adoption have been in the various fields of psychology, social work, and family studies (cf. Barn and Mansuri 2019; Boivin and Hassan 2015; Chang et al. 2017; Corral et al. 2021). With the exception of a handful of articles (see Leinaweaver 2014; Lovelock 2000; McGuinness 2000; Selman 2002), the subject has not been sufficiently addressed in migration studies as some have pointed out (De Graeve 2015; Hübinette 2016). Even studies on transnational childhood that seek to address the invisibility of children in migration studies (Gardner 2012; Orellana et al. 2001) tend to overlook adoptees. Similarly, the Korean-language literature has focused predominantly on the health, welfare, or life satisfaction of adoptees or adoptive parents (Ahn and Kwon 2012; Koo 2008; Kwon 2011a, 2011b, 2013), although there are a few scholars that employ a migration perspective (Yoon 2017; Yuh 2005).

Richard Weil first characterized transnational adoption as the “quiet migration” in a 1984 article for International Migration Review where he considered adoption something other than refugee migration. Weil argued that the 1975 Vietnamese baby lift constituted a special case in the usual “quiet flow of foreign adoptees” to the U.S. (Weil 1984, p. 289). Drawing attention to the role cultural and political considerations played in facilitating intercountry adoption as migratory process, he argued that adoption was ‘quiet’ insofar...
as the systems in place ensured a “quiet and orderly” movement of children across borders (Weil 1984, p. 288). Weil emphasised that transnational adoption requires “supplies of children who can be properly identified as adoptable, clear understandings among both officials and the public of what the adoption process means, general acceptance of this concept, and laws which allow it to operate” (Weil 1984, p. 291, emphasis added). Equally, in the receiving states, both a sufficient demand for transnational adoptees, and a legal framework to fulfil it are required.

Since then, transnational adoption has continued to be referred to as “quiet” migration (Davis 2011; Leinaweaver 2014; McGuinness 2000) or “unknown immigration” (Lozano and Kossoudji 2009). The ‘quietness’ of this form of migration is due to multiple factors. First, the number and proportion of transnational adoptees are low, compared to other migrant groups such as economic, family or humanitarian migrants. In Australia, in 2021, approximately 60 percent of migrants were economic, 4–8 percent family and less than 3 percent were granted to stay on humanitarian grounds (ABS 2021). Moreover, adoption involves what Anne Collinson (2007) has termed “the littlest immigrants” who, as children, are disempowered and not afforded a voice, and rarely portrayed in the Western media as immigrants (Leinaweaver 2014, p. 63). Child/infant migrants remain in the shadow of their adult custodians. They have no agency nor the means to express their consent in the migration and settlement process, which is often considered a private, family affair. Yet, consistent with other migratory flows, transnational adoptions predominantly involve mass human movements from developing to developed countries, which some might consider a humanitarian, altruistic, or even religious project (Davis 2011). Given the role of state actors and diplomatic ties in its facilitation, some scholars in politics and international relations have also shown interest in transnational adoption research (Breuning 2013; Youde 2014). The current paper aims to contribute to this body of literature in migration studies by analysing Korean transnational adoption as the orderly, systematic state-sanctioned movement of children on a mass scale.

Empirical research on Korean adoption has largely focused on the United States, given the latter’s role in establishing the adoption system in the post-war period (Oh 2015), as well as the western European context (Eriksen 2020; HübINETTE 2005; Koo 2021; YNGVESSON 2010). In recent years, there have been more studies on Korean adoption to Australia (Fronek 2009) and Korean Australian adoptee experiences (Heaser 2015; Walton 2019), given the significance of the population constituting the largest group of Australian intercountry adoptees and the sheer number of more than 3600 Korean adoptees living in Australia. This body of literature, however, remains relatively small.

Building on these studies and on Weil’s concept of quiet migration, we define Korean adoption to Australia as quiet and orderly child migration for the purpose of family building in Australia. We argue that the systematisation of Korean transnational adoption has led to the quiet and orderly movement of children, and that the very ‘quietness’ of the adoption system is a source of concern despite Australia’s adoption regulations, which are widely regarded as more stringent than in other receiving countries such as the U.S. In the following sections, we first outline overall trends of Korean adoption to Australia, in order to provide a broader historical context of this specific population of children from South Korea (hereafter Korea). Situating adoption practices within Korea’s socio-political context and larger migration trends, we then discuss how the Korean adoption system has involved multiple enabling factors for channelling the quiet flow of adoptees, including loose regulations of private adoption agencies established under military dictatorships, the legal fiction of orphanhood, and lack of social supports for Korean original mothers. Turning to the Australian context, the final section argues that despite Australia’s more stringent regulations and national debates around adoption, residual humanitarianism and what we call ‘interests alignment’ have contributed to rendering Korean adoption to Australia a form of quiet and orderly family migration. Attending to transnational adoption as a form of migration allows us to conceptualize adoption not as a solely private family matter, but as a socio-political, state-sanctioned phenomenon of transporting Asian children in poor
countriesto predominantly white families in advanced economies, in alignment with a Western, and often Christian, construct of altruistic family building.

2. Korean Adoption to Australia: An Overview

The Korean program is considered part of Australia’s second wave of intercountry adoption after the Vietnamese and Cambodian adoptions in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Korean adoption program began in the late 1970s after the formal end of Australia’s race-based exclusionary immigration policies, commonly referred to as the White Australia Policy, and the establishment of official adoption programs with several Asian countries (Rosenwald 2009). The Immigration Restriction Act (1901–1958), which was passed immediately after the Commonwealth of Australia was founded, reflected a nationalist “desire to construct a modern identity based on (a British-based) racial and cultural homogeneity,” and had prohibited Asian migrants from settling in Australia (Ang and Stratton 1998, p. 28; Jupp 2002). The White Australia Policy was officially dismantled by Gough Whitlam in 1972, whose government also introduced the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 and the policy of multiculturalism (Ang and Stratton 1998). Adoptions from Korea were taking place years before the end of the White Australia Policy in private settings; news articles and Korean records indicate post-Korean war adoptions were occurring from at least 1967, ten years prior to the commencement of the official Korean program (MOHW 2016; Fronek 2009).

As Figure 1 shows, recorded Korean adoptions to Australia have remained well below figures in the U.S. and western Europe due to varying degrees of national objectives and geopolitical interests (Lovelock 2000). Australia is among the top ten receiving countries for Korean adoptees, with total figures approximately on par with that of Belgium.

![Figure 1. Korean Overseas Adoptions by Receiving Country (1958–2015)](MOHW 2016)
By the time Australia’s formal program with Korea commenced, adoptions to the U.S. and several western European countries had already been occurring for over two decades. Australia-Korea relations were only formally established in 1961, which was likely a factor in the adoption program being established later than in countries with whom Korea had stronger diplomatic and strategic ties—in addition to Australia’s restrictive immigration policy mentioned above. Furthermore, coordinated policies on intercountry adoption to Australia were not established until after the Vietnamese babyslips in 1975 (Forkert 2012; Dreyfus et al. 2015). After the official adoption program was established between Korea and Australia, adoptions were more regulated. With the exception of some adoptions facilitated through Social Welfare Society and Holt International Services, the vast majority of adoptions to Australia have been organised between one private Korean agency, tongbang sahoe pokjihoe (Eastern Social Welfare Society, formerly Eastern Child Welfare Society) and relevant Australian states and territory authorities (Fronek 2009).

Obtaining comprehensive and accurate data on the numbers of Korean adoptions to Australia is challenging. Australian national data collection on adoptions commenced in 1969. However, it was not until 1974 that intercountry and domestic adoptions were distinguished in reports, and not until 1990–1991, when the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) assumed responsibility for adoption statistics, that intercountry adoptions were comprehensively disaggregated by country of origin (Wilkinson and Angus 1993). Comparing Australian statistics with figures issued by Korean organisations and authorities also presents challenges, as Australian reports are based on financial year rather than by calendar year, which is the norm in Korean records. Furthermore, the number of Korean children adopted outside the purview of Australian adoption authorities is unknown. In 2004–2005, the formal intercountry adoption rate began to decline while the yearly number of reported expatriate adoptions rose, overtaking the former in 2014–2015 (AIHW 2015). Expatriate adoptions are those completed by Australian citizens or permanent residents living overseas via the adoption system of another country. These adoptions present concerns because unlike formal Australian intercountry adoptions, they are not assessed nor overseen by Australian adoption authorities and fall beyond the scope of Australia’s current protocol for responding in cases of alleged illicit or illegal adoption practices. Since reported figures on expatriate adoptions are not disaggregated by country of origin, it is unknown how many Korean children have been adopted by Australian families in this manner.³

Aligned with global Korean adoption trends, adoptions to Australia peaked during the mid-1980s at approximately 300 children per year (MOHW 2016). Even when the numbers of adoptees were significant, they were not comprehensively captured in immigration data or public discourses as immigrants as they quickly became integrated into host countries. According to Australian census and adoptions data 9284 Korean-born persons were residing in Australia in 1986, at which time there had been a total of 1275 reported adoptions from Korea to Australia (ABS 1986; MOHW 2016). It is not clear if Korean adoptees were comprehensively included in the Australian census data, which relies on self-reporting and which, at the time, was most likely completed by adoptive parents. However, if they were included, this would make Korean adoptees a significant subset (13.7 percent) of the total Korean-born population in Australia in 1986.

As of 2023, approximately 3600 Korean children have been adopted to Australia, comprising 2–3 percent of the Korean-born Australian population (ABS 2021; AIHW 2023; Rosenwald 2009⁴). Korea was the main country of origin from the time the AIHW began reporting national data (1990–1991) until 2003. During the span of the AIHW’s reporting period, the total number of Korean adoptions is more than double that of adoptions from China, the second major country of origin. Historically, intercountry adoption to Australia has predominantly involved Asian children. Since 2016–2017, Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan have been the top three sending countries for adoption to Australia. In 2021–2022, all intercountry adoptions were from Asian countries (AIHW 2023). Despite fluctuations
in adoption rates, Korean adoptees remain the largest cohort of intercountry adoptees in Australia and worldwide.

Globally, transnational adoptees have constituted a significant, but often overlooked, subset of migrants. Scandinavia has the highest proportion of transnational adoptees per capita compared to other regions; a large number of adoptees were from Korea (Selman 2002; Hübinette 2003). Due to the relatively small numbers of Korean diasporas in the region, Korean adoptees make up almost entirely the ethnic Korean presence in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway (e.g., in 2021, there were 7744 overseas Koreans residing in Norway, a country that had adopted, as of 2015, 6474 Korean children) (MOHW 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea 2021). In the U.S. context, the proportion of adoptees as a subset of overseas Koreans was particularly pronounced during the 1950s and 1960s (Yuh 2005; J. Kim 2015). In 1950–1964, approximately 6000 Korean women immigrated to the U.S. as partners of military personnel, and upward of 5000 children were sent for adoption (Yoon 2012); these groups comprise almost two-thirds of Koreans admitted to the U.S. during this time. As noted above, in Australia, adoptees comprised approximately 13.7 percent of the Korean-born population during the peak of Korean adoptions (ABS 1986). The significance of adoptees as migrants is even more striking when looking at Korea’s emigration rates; in 1985, adoption accounted for 30 percent of Korea’s total emigration, and the number of children sent overseas represented 1.3 percent of total births in Korea for that year (K.-e. Lee 2021). Given these significant numbers, why is adoption characterized as quiet migration? The answer begins with the Korean story.

3. The Korean Story

In migration studies, mass human movements are explained by push and pull factors in sending and receiving countries, respectively (Parkins 2010; Brown and Foot 1994; Matsui and Raymer 2020). Processes of transnational migration are often hindered or intensified by mediating and often unpredictable human security circumstances in given time and space (Song and Cook 2015). In the case of Korean adoptions to Australia, we first look at abusive political culture under military dictatorships including a lack of regulatory oversight over adoption, the legal fiction of orphanhood, and traditional family norms and stigma around under age or single motherhood as push factors.

3.1. Orderly Involuntary Child Migration under Military Dictatorship

In conceptualizing transnational adoption as a quiet flow of children, Weil’s account emphasises the systematisation of orderly child adoption and the shared legal frameworks required to facilitate it on behalf of sending and receiving countries. In this sense, rather than push factors such as war, famine, and poverty that assume a degree of agency, however constrained, on behalf of migrants who decide to move to another country, Korean adoption involved the movement of individual children via a system with multiple enabling factors under certain socio-political cultures and legal frameworks. These enabling factors channelled and sustained constant supplies and flow of adoptable children. In addition to being a “solution” to the problem of what Hosu Kim calls “excess populations” (Kim 2016, p. 25), it also involved the production of adoptable orphans and construction of undesirable children and ‘shameful’ mothers under Korea’s military dictatorships throughout the 1960s to 1980s. Orphan production, semi-military detention centres and private adoption agencies that sent thousands of Korean children overseas for transnational adoption were some of those enabling factors that institutionalised quiet and orderly movements of infants and children from Korea. Korea’s diplomatic ties with Western countries, heavy dependence on foreign aid, low social welfare expenditure, as well as the pervasive stigma against single motherhood, have added silencing effects.

Until the mid-1970s, the Korean government was heavily dependent on foreign aid to fund social services. In 1972, only 0.75 percent of the national budget was allocated to social welfare, with approximately half allocated to national security and defence (H. Kim 2016, p. 43). According to Kim, the total annual donations from foreign organisations up
until the mid-1970s was equal to the Ministry of Health and Welfare’s (MOHW) annual expenditure (H. Kim 2016, p. 41). In 1967, Korean law mandated that adoptions should be facilitated solely by government-licensed agencies. Four adoption agencies—namely Social Welfare Society (previously Child Placement Services, est. 1954), the Holt Adoption Program (est. 1956), Korea Social Services (est. 1964), and Eastern Child Welfare Society (previously Christian Crusade, est. 1972)—were given exclusive permission to carry out adoptions. They were all funded, directly or indirectly, by foreign aid organisations (H. Kim 2016, p. 42). In 1988, Eastern Child Welfare Society (tongbang), now known as Eastern Social Welfare Society (ESWS), generated almost 40 percent of their reported annual revenue from donations (MOHW 1991). ESWS is the sole Korean adoption agency that facilitates adoptions to Australia. The 1993 Hague Convention would later stress the risks that improper financial practices pose to safeguarding the best interests of children.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Korea achieved rapid economic development, population growth, and export-oriented light industry under military dictatorships. Korean overseas adoptions rose sharply during Chun Doo-hwan’s rule (1980–1988) when adoption agencies were deregulated and allowed to make profits, and intercountry adoption explicitly cast as a “good-will ambassador” policy (Sarri et al. 1998, p. 95). As for-profit organisations, adoption agencies’ revenue was dependent on adoption fees. In the 1980s, the total fees adoption agencies were collecting from adoptive parents was twice the per capita GDP of Korea (K.-e. Lee 2021). Fees for a single overseas adoption could cover one staff member’s salary for an entire year (K.-e. Lee 2021). Financial incentives and a vast network of orphanages, foster care homes, and hospitals were linked to adoption agencies (H. Kim 2016) which established and reinforced pathways to sending children overseas for adoption. An example of how this could lead to abuse and trafficking is gleaned in the case of the hyongje pokijweon (Brothers Home) in Busan, operative from 1975–1988 (Kim and Jolly 2021). Recent investigations uncovered evidence that the government-funded facility kidnapped and abused children and was part of an “orphanage pipeline feeding the demand of private adoption agencies,” including ESWS (tongbang) (Herskovitz 2007; Jeon-Hong 2017a; Kim and Klug 2019). The Brothers Home has some known links to Australia, with records indicating at least one Australian adoptee has lived at the facility (Jeon-Hong 2017b). In addition, the deputy manager of Brothers Home, Lim Young Soon, and his family have since migrated to Australia and currently live in New South Wales (Kim and Jolly 2021).

As in Weil’s characterization of adoption as ‘quiet’ migration, adoptable children were identified and produced by private institutions authorised by the Korean government of the time, and adopted children’s migration operated within the legal frameworks of Korea and Australia. This process was accomplished and sustained in a quiet and orderly manner by Korean for-profit institutions authorised by the state. Despite Korea’s long history of overseas adoption since the end of the Korean war in 1953, it was only in the 1980s that Korean adoptees received sustained national and international attention (H. Kim 2016, p. 82), in part because many had reached adulthood and were becoming increasingly visible (the first adult adoptee organisation, Adopterade Koreaners Förening formed in 1986), and also due to rising adoption rates. The Western media heavily scrutinised Korea’s overseas adoption system during the 1988 Seoul Olympics Games, by which time there had been at least 110,000 overseas adoptions (MOHW). The Western media criticised Korea for being a leading exporter of children (together with wigs and toys) while portraying itself as a modern, developed nation (Condit-Shrestha 2018; Maass 1988). In response, the Korean government initiated a plan to reduce intercountry adoptions and increase domestic adoption rates through a range of economic incentives and an extension of adoptive parent age limits (Sarri et al. 1998, p. 96). The subsequent decline in adoption rates that resulted indicates not only the extent to which the Korean government was sensitive to criticism from the international community, but also how adoptions are subject to national priorities (Youde 2014).
The 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation with Respect of Intercountry Adoption (Hague Convention) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sets out the international standards and norms to which signatories ought to abide in matters of intercountry adoption, to ensure the safeguarding of children’s rights. Korea ratified the UNCRC in 1991; however, it declared a reservation on Article 21a, which states that State Parties shall ensure adoptions are “authorized only by competent authorities” who determine that the child’s adoption “is permissible in view of the child’s status concerning parents, relatives and legal guardians” (Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, p. 6). This reservation is notable, as it meant that Korea was the only state with an operating adoption system that exempted itself from this obligation (K.-e. Lee 2022). The Committee of the Rights of the Child expressed concerns and encouraged Korea to withdraw its reservation during multiple reporting sessions from 1996–2011 (K.-e. Lee 2022). Korea withdrew its reservation on Article 21a in August 2017, but concerns remain regarding Korea’s compliance with the Hague Convention, which it signed in May 2013 but has yet to ratify.

The Hague Convention is designed to ensure intercountry adoptions occur in the best interests of the child and with respect for their rights, prevent the abduction, sale or, or traffic in children, and promote cooperation and standardisation among States regarding placements, financial exchanges, and legal recognition of adoptions (Hague Conference on Private International Law 1993). Article 4 stipulates as a basic requirement for inter-country adoption, that competent authorities in sending countries must establish whether the child can be adopted in the first place and ensure the legal and informed consent of the child’s family of origin. It also promotes the principle of subsidiarity, which holds that States should enable children to remain in their family and State of origin as a matter of priority, over intercountry adoption placements (aligned with Article 21b and Article 20c of the UNCRC). Policies promoting domestic placements over intercountry adoptions, strengthened in the 2011 adoption law revision, discussed below, indicate Korea is making progress toward alignment with this principle. As mentioned above, Korea has yet to ratify the Hague Convention a decade after signing it.

3.2. The ‘Legal Fiction’ of the Orphan and the ‘Shameful’ Birth Mother

As Jessaca Leinaweaver (2014) argues, transnational adoptees are technically international migrants in the sense that they cross national borders, enter a different regime of border protection and immigration, and immediately take up residency and/or citizenship in the new country of residence without any existing ties to the country. This international relocation of children without their consent is only possible because these infants from poor and predominantly Asian states are displaced from their families of origin and swiftly embedded in more ‘ideal’ families in democratic Western societies in the name of their best interests. This simultaneous disembedding and integration is itself made possible through a state-sanctioned, shared legal framework that permits emigration and immigration for the purposes of child adoption and family building. These political and legal mechanisms and the underlying socio-cultural contexts contribute to rendering ‘quiet’ the movement of Korean children overseas.

Korean overseas adoption marked the beginning of plenary or full adoption in Korea, which entails the complete legal severance of child from their original parents. Prior to this, simple adoption, an institution designed primarily to preserve the patriarchal family lineage rather than necessarily serving the child’s best interests, was the norm. Simple adoption required the approval of biological kin and resulted in the adoptee gaining an additional set of parents. Full adoption differs from simple adoption as it involves the termination of ties with original parents. Simple adoption retains a relationship with birth families and was the primary form of adoption within Korea until 2005 (Yune 2013). Hence, full adoption was not well understood in Korean society, and it is likely many surrendering parents, mostly birth mothers, were unaware their children would be sent overseas (Noh 2011). It was the finality of transnational adoption to unknown, non-relative fami-
lies in foreign countries that constituted “one of the most foreign elements” of the practice (Oh 2015, p. 125).

In addition, Korean overseas adoption involved a set of procedures that operated in parallel to, but separate from, domestic adoption. The Orphan Adoption Special Procedure Act of 1961 enacted during the military dictatorship of Park Chung-hee effectively established two ‘tiers’ of adoption legislation: adoption under Korean family law which was covered under the Civil Act, and adoption by foreigners via “simplified procedures” which were separate from the general child welfare system (K.-e. Lee 2022, p. 238). The adoptability of a child had to be established by the adoption agency to facilitate their adoption overseas. In effect, adoption agencies were permitted to report children as abandoned directly to district offices, even if they had living parents, and obtain an orphan ‘family’ registry with the aim of sending the child overseas. This allowed the adoption agency to swiftly assume legal guardianship of the child with little oversight (K.-e. Lee 2022).

Driven by financial interests under loose laws, the Korean adoption system produced a legal fiction of orphanhood that could serve as justification for the removal of children from their original parents (mostly mothers). The legal fiction of the orphan produced the prospective adoptee as already precarious and abandoned by their birth families and obscured the processes of establishing orphanhood in the first place. The child as prospective adoptee was not only imagined as untethered but also who, without the agency to decide to move, must be moved. Their perceived bare vulnerability was a call to action, but they were also legally constructed as such since the ‘orphan’ in adoption documents was not necessarily a parentless child. Korean adoption agencies administratively produced orphanhood to more efficiently and systematically administer overseas adoptions on a large scale (Gustafsson 2021a, 2021b; E. Kim 2007; J. Kim 2009; K.-e. Lee 2021; Pate 2014).

Despite revisions to the adoption law in 1976 (Adoption Promotion and Procedure Act), the Korean adoption system has allowed legal guardians, grandparents, or other relatives with custody to finalise adoptions if able to provide documentation of “unusual circumstances (e.g., a dead or missing parent)” (H. Kim 2016, p. 6). Due to loopholes and lack of regulatory oversight, the relinquishment of a child to an adoption agency did not always involve the consent of the original mother. The Korean government’s lax oversight of the relinquishment process resulted in cases of lost or missing children, and children of poor families, being sent overseas (H. Kim 2016). After years of international criticism and as a result of advocacy efforts by activists pushing for strengthened family preservation policies, the 2011 law revision (Act on Special Cases Concerning Adoption) sought to regulate adoption more stringently by requiring the Korean family court’s approval for adoption, consent to adoption by original parents to occur only after a one-week period after the birth of their child and counselling, and the prioritisation of domestic adoption over intercountry adoption. Another aim of the 2011 revision was to ensure adoption occurred in the best interests of the child and prepare for Korea’s ratification of the Hague Convention (Yune 2013).

While multiple enabling factors of laws, private operatives and government priorities are highly interconnected and shifting over time, they have all been shaped by conjunctures of state control over population and management of young and vulnerable bodies. In addition, Eleana Kim highlights “gendered practices of moral persuasion and coercion” and the “unevenness of Korea’s fitful modernization” (E. Kim 2010, p. 24). The relationship between unwed mothers and overseas adoption is, as the Korea Unwed Mothers Support Network has argued, like two sides of the same coin (Oh 2020). In 2011, the Korean government released annual data on the characteristics of overseas adoptees and reasons for relinquishment, as well as more detailed information on the backgrounds of relinquishing families. As demonstrated in Table 1, 88 percent of Korean overseas adoptees were born to single mothers in 2011. In the case of ESWS (tongbang), this figure was 97 percent. Tables 2 and 3 indicate the age, education level, and employment status of relinquishing single mothers; 32.5 percent of these single mothers were under 20 years old and 72 percent
had an educational attainment level of high school or below. The majority had dropped out of high school and were unemployed.

Table 1. Korean Overseas Adoptees and Reasons for Relinquishment, by Adoption Agency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adoption Agency</th>
<th>Total Adoptions</th>
<th>Gender of Child</th>
<th>Cause for Adoption</th>
<th>Child’s Condition</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single Mothers</td>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>Deficient Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holt</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daehan</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESWS</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hankuk</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>916</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>810</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Age of Relinquishing Single Mothers, by Adoption Agency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Under 15 Years Old</th>
<th>15–20 Years Old</th>
<th>Above 20 Years Old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holt</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>97 (35.3%)</td>
<td>178</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daehan</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>3 (11.5%)</td>
<td>87 (33.3%)</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESWS</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>64 (25.3%)</td>
<td>74 (29.2%)</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hankuk</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5 (23.3%)</td>
<td>5 (23.8%)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>810</td>
<td>3 (3.7%)</td>
<td>263 (32.5%)</td>
<td>544</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Education and Employment Status of Relinquishing Single Mothers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education/Profession</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Employed</th>
<th>Self-Employed</th>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Unemployed</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary drop-out</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School drop-out</td>
<td>418</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University drop-out</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University drop-out</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>810</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>526</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Source: (NCRC 2011), statistics].

These tables indicate that unwed mothers were young and had relatively low education levels, and would likely face considerable financial difficulties if they raised their child on their own. Instead of providing single mothers and their children with adequate social and welfare support, and combatting stigma against single-parent families, society has historically encouraged, or even pushed for relinquishing parent(s) to surrender their child to an adoption agency. In 1988, for example, 60 percent of children for overseas adoption were sourced directly from hospitals and maternity clinics, and the remainder from unwed mother facilities, orphanages, or intakes at adoption agencies directly (Shin 2020). Many adoption agencies were, and still are, associated with religious philanthropic services when in fact they generated profit. Some ran care homes for unwed mothers where rates of relinquishment were significantly higher than in facilities that were not linked to adoption agencies (Bae 2018; H. Kim 2016).

For many adoptees who did have a living parent in Korea, the construction of orphanhood involves the conjoined “social death” of the adoptee and the birth mother.
(J. Kim 2009, p. 857). As such, according to Hosu Kim (2016), Korean mothers can only retain a spectral maternal bond with their child, an “unspeakable” mothering from afar. Shame, guilt, sadness and anger are commonly expressed by Korean mothers who relinquished their children to adoption agencies (H. Kim 2016). Birth mothers were rendered “internal refugees” in hetero-patriarchal Korean society, according to Reverend Do-Hyun Kim, who has long advocated for adoptee and birth mother rights (Kim 2019, p. 144; see also Engelstoft 2019). Despite some improvements in social services for single mothers and their children in recent years, they continue to face entrenched social exclusion due to a range of factors associated with low income, age, family status and gender (Han et al. 2021, p. 2). They face widespread social discrimination and negative stereotyping, issues with housing, and barriers to retaining employment and accessing adequate healthcare (H. Kim et al. 2012; M. Lee et al. 2018; Lee and Yang 2019). Improvements to social services in recent years have been largely driven by biopolitical concerns with the country’s low fertility rates and declining population, rather than a commitment to women’s rights and reproductive justice (Han et al. 2021).

4. The Australian Story

Australia is among the top ten receiving countries where adopted Korean children found new homes, many of whom faced a set of challenges growing up in mainstream white Australian society (Armstrong and Slaytor 2001; Fronek and Briggs 2018). The vast majority of Korean adoptees were adopted through ESWS (tongbang), the adoption agency exclusively operating formal Korean adoptions to Australia. Comprehensive data on the race and ethnicity of adoptive parents are lacking; however, it is highly likely that trends in Australia are broadly akin to that in other Western receiving countries—namely, that children are transracially adopted into white families (see, for example Armstrong and Slaytor 2001; Willing and Fronek 2014). While child welfare has emerged as the primary concern in post-WWII intercountry adoption practices, Kirsten Lovelock contends that it is ultimately “secondary to the welfare of the recipient nation/society” (Lovelock 2000, p. 910). Australia currently has intercountry adoption arrangements with 13 countries; this includes Korea and Taiwan which are non-Hague countries, and with which Australia has bilateral arrangements. In general, the overall legal structures that govern intercountry adoption have been more stringent in Australia than those in the U.S. and to a certain extent, those in Europe (Fronek 2012; Selman 2002, 2015). In this section, we discuss Australia’s social and political context, within which Korean intercountry adoption practices commenced and became entrenched, which has also led to the ‘quietness’ of adoption as child migration.

Australia has a complicated history and ambivalent perspective on adoption which informs how Korean adoption, and intercountry adoption more broadly, is understood as a practice. Australia is a settler colony that has long operated a racist, assimilationist policy of removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities, a legacy that has impacted virtually all Indigenous families in Australia (van Krieken 2004). Aboriginal children were forcibly removed and placed in institutions and fostered or adopted by non-Indigenous families: these people belong to what is known as the Stolen Generations. Aboriginal activism in the 1960s and 1970s saw a surge of national attention around the rights of Aboriginal children and families; a federal inquiry ensued which led to the 1997 Bringing Them Home Report and the inaugural National Sorry Day one year later (Haebich 2015/2016). Concerns around the welfare of children under the care of government and non-government institutions had been building from the 1980s. A parliamentary inquiry into historic child migration schemes from Britain and Malta to Australia resulted in the 2001 Lost Innocents report, which brought to light widespread institutional abuse and neglect experienced by child migrants, along with loss of identity and sense of belonging (Parliament of Australia 2001). Another inquiry soon followed into the ‘Forgotten Australians’—primarily non-Indigenous Australian-born children brought up in care institutions such as orphanages, children’s homes, training schools, and foster care (Parliament of Australia 2004). Many of the children in institutional care were not orphans.
In 2008, the Australian government issued a formal apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples, in which then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd drew particular attention to the Stolen Generations and their families (Cuthbert and Quartly 2013). The following year, a formal apology was extended to the Forgotten Australians and child migrants. Finally, an investigation into the Commonwealth’s role in forced adoption practices from the 1950s–1970s commenced in 2010 and resulted in a 2013 national apology by then Prime Minister Julia Gillard (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2012). This apology was not extended to those impacted by forced intercountry adoption practices, despite the efforts of activists and Australian adoption researchers who urged the Reference Group for the drafting of the Commonwealth apology to do so (Fronek and Cuthbert 2013).

The Australian intercountry adoption system has been characterized as highly regulated—and sometimes excessively so, according to proponent groups promoting a faster, more efficient, and expanded adoption program (Clair 2012; Fronek 2009). Adoption advocates and parent groups have historically been vocal and campaigned to adopt overseas-born children, often utilising the media to draw attention to their concerns (Quartly 2012). In the 1960s and 1970s, before there were legislative frameworks in place to permit intercountry adoptions, such appeals had an explicitly humanitarian bent. For example, five Vietnamese children were flown to Sydney for adoption in 1972 by Elaine Joyce Moir, the “waif smuggler” (Money 2012). The event was highly publicised as the Vietnamese children landed without proper Australian entry visas; Moir had flown to Vietnam to bring the children to Australia personally, after the state of Victoria, where four of the children were planned to be adopted to, refused to approve their adoption applications (Forkert 2012). Another babylift in 1975 lent weight to the view that Australian government red-tape and bureaucracy was harmful for civilian humanitarian efforts to rescue children in crisis (Quartly 2012; Rees 1977). Such condemnations of state welfare and immigration authorities continued to exist throughout the 2000s (Murphy et al. 2009). The 2005 Report on Overseas Adoption in Australia concluded, for example, that “a general attitude against intercountry adoption” exists in most Australian jurisdictions among welfare departments and relevant government agencies “which ranges from indifference of lack of support to hostility” (HRSCFHS 2005, p. 8). The report also pointed out Australia’s low intercountry adoption rate compared to other Western countries (HRSCFHS 2005).

Australia ratified the UNCRC and Hague Convention in 1990 and 1998, respectively, and has been involved in efforts to develop cooperative measures among sending and receiving states to prevent malpractice and child trafficking (Clair 2012). Australian states and territories have articulated a relatively unified stance on intercountry adoption and the necessity of abiding by international conventions—that adoption processes and practices hold as paramount, the welfare and best interests of the child (Fronek 2015); however, despite Australia’s regulations and attempts to ensure ethical standards are met, scandals uncovered in Indian and Ethiopian intercountry adoptions in the 2000s demonstrate it is not immune to trafficking and other forms of malpractice (Callinan 2008; Clair 2012). In 2012, Australia closed its intercountry adoption program with Ethiopia—a non-Hague country with which Australia had a bilateral arrangement—citing, among other concerns, the inability to be confident that the program protected the best interests of the child (Department of Social Services 2017). Despite various pauses and closures, Australian intercountry adoption continues, including with non-Hague countries such as Korea.

4.1. Immigration without Immigrants

Transnational adoption today is typically regarded as a form of family-making and a private affair on behalf of adoptive parents and families. In this sense, adoption is not considered as migration and adoptees are rarely viewed as immigrants as they immediately become integrated into Australian families. From a migration perspective, some may say it is a privilege to acquire legal citizenship as a formality upon finalisation of adoption, which typically occurs soon after arrival in Australia. However, for a child who had no means to express their consent to be separated from their birth parents and integrated into
foreign families with whom they have no pre-existing ties or cultural connections, transnational adoption inherently deprives the child migrant of agency and birth rights in their country of origin. A Korean infant migrant swiftly becomes an Australian citizen. In this sense, and from the perspective of ‘receiving’ adoptive communities, Korean adoption is immigration without immigrants.

Adoptee children are a unique, age-graded privileged kind of migrant who become integrated into new families and communities who often deny the immigrant status of the child (Dorow 2006; Leinaweaver 2014; Marre 2009). Due to discourses of humanitarian rescue, discussed in more depth below, adoptees typically navigate social environments where adoption is simplistically viewed as a ‘win-win’ for which they should be grateful, given the alternative—an unviable life back in their country of origin (Baden 2016; Samuels 2022). Orphan rescue discourse proliferated in Australia in the 1970s, and it remains a prominent feature in the narratives and arguments espoused by pro-adoption lobbyists today (Fronek 2015). Helping refugees and orphans was an opportunity for prospective adoptive parents living in Western democratic countries. In the U.S., for example, adopting war orphans was cast as an opportunity for their private citizens “to express their distinctly American altruism” and “prove America’s concern for the oppressed” (Winslow 2017, p. 76). In the 1950s, the U.S. Subcommittee on Immigration dubbed transnational adoptees the “best possible immigrants” on account of their “youth, flexibility, and lack of ties to any other cultures” (Winslow 2017, pp. 220, 76, emphasis added).

Similar views of adoptees as a privileged class of immigrants appeared in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s, as the White Australia Policy was being dismantled (Forkert 2012). The arrival of Vietnamese adoptees in 1968 was celebrated in the Medical Journal of Australia, for example, wherein the authors Billings and Billings argued that because “an infant has no traditional culture of its own,” adoption—unlike migration—would prevent “the formation of a minority group,” and would maintain Australian culture and traditions (Billings and Billings 1968, p. 329; see Forkert 2012). Intercountry adoption was deemed a political and national opportunity to promote closer ties with Asia and “remove forever the accusation that our [Australian] immigration policy is based on prejudice against the coloured races” (Billings and Billings 1968, p. 329). The idea of the adoptee child as assimilable and lacking ties to other cultures, and the altruism of prospective adoptive families—and by extension the nation—who would take them in, was advantageous politically. Adoption as a form of humanitarian relief for Asian orphans was popularised during this time in Australia by adoption advocates. Pro-adoption campaigns proved to be a powerful, emotive argument for large-scale intercountry adoptions despite critiques levelled from agencies such as International Social Service.

4.2. Good for Overseas Born Children, Bad for Australian Children

By 1977–1978 when the official Korean adoption program to Australia commenced, transnational adoptions were largely driven by demographic concerns including falling fertility rates in Australia and a decrease in the number of healthy white infants available for adoption domestically (Lovelock 2000). The fertility rate dropped from 2.96 in 1971 to 1.95 in 1978 (World Bank 2021). Yet, residual humanitarianism after the Vietnam war continued to frame understandings of the benefits and necessity of continued transnational adoptions. Australia saw a sharp decline in domestic adoption rates while intercountry adoptions began to rise. As Cuthbert et al. (2010) point out, there were two entirely different perceptions about adoption: whereby it is “good for children born overseas, while somehow bad for Australian children” (p. 428, italics original). Residual humanitarianism contributed to what we call ‘interests alignment,’ which accounts for the divergence in perception of domestic and transnational adoption, and for the quiet migration of Korean children for adoption.

While the first wave of adoptions in the immediate post-WWII period could be characterized as “finding families for children,” the later waves involved “finding children for families” (Lovelock 2000, p. 908). In post-WWII Australia, home, marriage, and fam-
ily were tied to maternal citizenship, which impacted both adoptive and relinquishing mothers (Forkert 2012). Adoption became popularised as a solution to the problem of illegitimate children and the stigma of being childless (Young 2009). However, perceptions shifted in the 1970s with the rise of social movements, wider availability of contraception and liberal attitudes toward sex. Single mothers successfully lobbied politicians and welfare agencies for financial and political support, such as the Supporting Mother’s Benefit introduced in 1973, which led to a decrease in the number of domestic babies available for adoption. Many private adoption agencies went out of business (Quartly et al. 2013).

The adoption reform movement successfully brought about significant changes to how domestic adoption was understood and practiced in Australia from the 1970s onward. By the mid-1980s, almost all states legislated to open past adoption records and shifts were underway to ensure future domestic adoptions would be more open, in terms of birth records and contact with original family. Yet, intercountry adoption continued to be considered differently—it remained ‘closed’ and retained an association with humanitarianism, whereby “the most abandoned child” was rendered “the most desirable child” (Cuthbert et al. 2010, p. 436). This played a key role in the increasing demand for transnational adoption by Australian families. Unlike domestic adoptions, in the case of transnational ‘closed’ or plenary adoption the language of humanitarianism could be deployed without counter arguments from adoptees’ birth families who were assumed to have abandoned their children, and who had irrevocably relinquished parental rights. Birth families’ geographical distance rendered any protestations or critiques inaudible and the possibility of their complicating the adoption process remote. This was certainly the case for Korean adoptees and their birth families, due to the administrative processes for establishing the child’s adoptability and pervasive social stigma discussed above, along with geographical distance and language barriers.

4.3. Interests Alignment

Writing about Romanian adoption, Lovelock (2000) argues that receiving countries assumed the interests of the prospective adoptive parents and those of child adoptees were complementary despite potential abuses in the adoption process. In the case of Korean adoptions too, it is widely assumed that transnational adoption was to meet the best interests of the child, that it would also meet the interests of Korean birth families who could not afford raising a child, and adoptive parents in Australia who wanted a child. This narrative and belief has been reinforced over time, such that adoption is widely considered a ‘win-win’ solution to the ‘problem’ of orphaned children overseas and infertility (Baden 2016). This interests alignment has can be understood as a factor in the continuance and ‘quietness’ of transnational adoption despite shifting perceptions of adoption as it pertains to Australian-born children and their families.

In 1977, the year Korean adoption to Australia formally began, The Bulletin ran a cover story on Asian, including Korean, adoptions to Australia. The cover story was titled “The Baby Trade” and opened with the line: “Babies from Asia—a nasty trade or a grand humanitarian program?” The story reported on how adoption agencies in Asia were turning away hundreds of childless couples from Australia who were “hungry for a scrap of humanity to love” (p. 42). Australian couples seeking to adopt from overseas due to falling domestic adoption rates looked to other parts of the world, which were depicted as “teeming” with unloved babies and children. This sentiment of pity, love and desperation represented an interests alignment whereby ‘finding children for families’ became equated with ‘finding families for children’. Residual humanitarianism framed the vulnerability and availability of abandoned Asian children in ways that diverged from Australian children. Yet, after listing several cases of illicit adoption practices that had been recently uncovered in Saigon and Bangkok, the 1977 Bulletin article focused predominantly on adoption procedures and legislation, instead of considering whether adoption was the best solution to vulnerable children in Asia in the first place. Furthermore, that same year International Social Service (ISS) Australia reported on concerns that large-scale transnational
adoption might impede the development of adequate child welfare facilities in a sending country (ISS 1977). ISS Australia questioned whether, in the case of Korea, children would ultimately be better served by Western countries aiding in the implementation of comprehensive childcare programs rather than through overseas adoption. Indeed, while some Australian and international news outlets were running stories that raised some concerns around the transnational adoption system, many articles and human interest stories in magazines chose instead to spotlight the efforts and frustrations of couples hoping to adopt from overseas or newly formed adoptive families (see Clark 1990; Nicklin 1981; Munday et al. 1982; Rollings 1987).

By the time Australia’s intercountry adoption program with Korea commenced, the Korean overseas adoption program was well established, having facilitated thousands of adoptions to the U.S., Norway, and Sweden, for close to two decades. The systematic organisation of Korea’s adoption process—its “machine-like” configuration, paired with the consistent supplies of healthy “orphans,” led the Korean program to be regarded globally as the “Cadillac of adoption programs” (McKee 2016, p. 162; Laybourn 2018, p. 31). The reputation of Korea’s program, especially in comparison to the programs of other sending countries that were known to involve concerning and illicit practices—for example, adoptions from Guatemala, Haiti, and Ethiopia—and the fact that ESWS was an agency, albeit private, that was authorised to facilitate adoptions by the Korean government, likely led to the uptake and systematisation of the Korean program to Australia. In addition, Kim Duk Whang, founder of ESWS and his staff members visited Australia several times in the 1980s, which buttressed ties. On the other hand, the members of the Australian Society for Intercountry Aid (Children) made frequent visits to Korea, escorting adoptees to Australia in liaison with ESWS agency workers (ASIAC 1983). The Korean program quickly became responsible for the largest cohort of intercountry adoptions to Australia. The majority were adopted prior to 2013, when Korea became signatory to the Hague Convention.

The orderly nature of the Korean program was commented on in the 2005 Inquiry into Overseas Adoption in Australia, wherein it was described as “very effective and well organised” and “largely compliant with the principles and standards of the Hague Convention” (HRSCFHS 2005, p. 36). However, the very fact that the adoption program was ‘effective’ and orderly—the ‘quiet’ migration of over 8000 children at its peak in the mid-1980s, and 2000 children annually in the mid-2000s—when Korea was no longer a developing country, was not problematised. A concern relating to the level of cooperation among states that the Hague Convention stipulates, is that the onus for establishing adoptability and abiding by the principle of subsidiarity lies with sending countries (K.-e. Lee 2022). Indeed, as Siobhan Clair (2012) and David M. Smolin (2006) point out in known cases of child trafficking and fraud, it can be difficult to identify and monitor abuses of the system from Australia, where adoptions appear to be compliant. Despite Australia’s widely recognised stringent regulations when it comes to intercountry adoption, and the consistency with which it has complied with international norms, risks of malpractice persist (Clair 2012).

Australia’s successful law reforms on domestic adoption resulted in the 2013 national apology to Australians impacted by past forced adoption practices, a world first. Despite these developments and shifting perceptions regarding adoption practices within the country that these reflect, adoption from overseas countries continued, with Korea remaining a significant country of origin. As Patricia Fronek and Denise Cuthbert contend, there are serious concerns that discourses of “orphanhood” and humanitarian rescue contribute to a “double standard” whereby “lesser standards” are tolerated in the case of intercountry adoptees and their birth families when compared to domestic adoption (Fronek and Cuthbert 2013, pp. 405–6; Cuthbert et al. 2010). While the immediate post-war period and authoritarian era is over, interests alignment and residual humanitarianism are factors in the continuance of Korean overseas adoption as ‘quiet’ migration and its justification, despite how differently domestic adoption is viewed in Australia.
5. Conclusions

From a migration perspective, Korean adoption to Australia has been facilitated and sanctioned by both Korean and Australian states as quiet, orderly child migration from so-called “deficient” families out of Korea to adoptive families in Australia. Technically, intercountry adoption is a form of child migration; however, adoptees as a group are not typically thought of as immigrants by their adoptive families and broader society. Push and pull socio-economic factors have been mediated by adoption reforms, changing social norms and international pressures. The basic supply–demand cycle of transnational adoption continues to exist today. Above the underlying traditional family norms and socio-economic structures, the former Korean military regimes and institutions enabled the systematisation of constant supplies of healthy adoptable children throughout the 1970s–1980s. The efficiency of the program, including the speed with which overseas placements were facilitated, led to the Korean program becoming widely viewed as a leading sending country in the intercountry adoption system. On the receiving end, Australia has a troubled history of adoption practices and child migrant schemes, but modern intercountry adoption practices have not figured prominently in domestic debates. In migration studies, the push-down and pop-up effect can explain the relation between domestic and intercountry adoption. Facing dwindling numbers of children available domestically, prospective adoptive families turned overseas to find babies for adoption. Building families and the nation are among the main objectives of both the Australian and Korean states, and the interests of various stakeholders have been (re)aligned over time.

Perceptions and policies relating to Korean adoption have been challenging to shift, due to interests alignment and the systematisation of the Korean adoption system that has its roots in the authoritarian era. Recent developments among Korean adoptee groups and their Korean allies, however, indicate a significant shift may be underway as Korean adoption approaches the 70-year mark. In 2022, Korean adoptee groups who together represent adoptions facilitated by all four Korean adoption agencies, submitted nearly 400 cases to Korea’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which has also investigated the Brothers Home facility. These groups, which include some Korean Australian adoptees, have expressed concerns that their agencies have fabricated documents, failed to ensure the informed consent of original families, and been permitted and sometimes incentivized to carry out activities with insufficient government oversight (Kim 2022). An investigation into the first batch of cases submitted by the Danish Korean Rights Group is currently underway. The findings of this historic investigation are yet to be seen, but it will undoubtedly prompt a reappraisal of how the legacy of Korean intercountry adoption has been thus far understood.

Indeed, while intercountry adoption has been deemed ‘quiet’ and orderly child migration from a bureaucratic, demographic, and governmental perspective, the very ‘quietness’ of the practice is a source of concern. Involving as it does the ‘littlest immigrants’ who are unable to provide consent, many of whom are sent overseas as ‘orphans’ even if they have living parents in Korea, intercountry adoption is a form of involuntary displacement as well as a family building strategy. Under international human rights law, individuals have a right to form families, but a primary principle of the Hague Convention is that a child be raised by their family of origin where possible, and that intercountry adoption be considered only if it is in the child’s best interests, and when domestic options have been exhausted. Adoption should be for children not for parents, regardless of how the latter is defined.

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Notes

1 The terms ‘transnational adoption’ and ‘intercountry adoption’ are used interchangeably to refer to the adoptions of children residing in one country (‘sending country’ or ‘State of origin’) by citizens or residents of another country (‘receiving country’). In legal and official discourse, such as in United Nations and Australian government documents and guidelines, ‘intercountry adoption’ is favored. In the Korean context, adoption ‘out’ of Korea is often referred to as ‘overseas adoption.’ We follow these conventions in this paper.

2 Percentages amount to a total of 99% due to rounding.

3 In addition, the actual number of expatriate adoptions are higher than reported figures, as the government is only notified when adoptive families apply for a visa on behalf of their child when returning to Australia.

4 Total figure has been obtained using a combination of AIHW reports and Rosenwald’s (2009) estimate, which incorporates archival research of government and non-government sources.

5 The proportion of Korean overseas adoptees born to single mothers has increased since 2011 to 99.7 percent in 2018 (NCRC 2018). However, the most recent Korean government data on the age, education, and profession of relinquishing single mothers by adoption agency remains the 2011 report.

6 “Deficient family” is a literal translation from Korean which means a family that cannot adequately care for under-age children because the parent(s) have died, divorced or separated. In recent years, many have proposed the abolition of the term and now use ‘single parent families’ or ‘alternative families’.

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