The History and Culture of Korean American Adoption Web Design by Dan Kearns

The purpose of this website is to educate the public concerning the history and culture of Korean American adoption. Whether you are a member of the adoption triad or someone with an interest in adoption, we hope this website will serve you. We attempted to explore the key elements in adoption: the history of Korean adoption, identity issues concerning ethnicity and culture (including a personal account), Korea's cultural perspective on adoption, and the future of international adoption from Korea. In addition, we have provided a bibliography and multiple links for further resources. Finally, feel free to read our biographies and get in touch with us. Greetings! I'm a Jr. at Case Western Reserve University. I've changed majors about as often as I change the sheets on my bed, but after exploring electrical engineering, classical piano, and classics, I've finally decided to double major in philosophy and the history and philosophy of science, while minoring in mathematics. I plan on attending Westminster Theological Seminary upon graduation, where I will pursue advanced degrees in divinity, theology and philosophy. In addition, I hope to adopt from S. Korea at some distant point in the future. I'm currently the president of Chi Alpha Christian Fellowship, and enjoy reading, writing, and ultimate frisbee. I'm a proud resident of Hershey, PA (even though I hate chocolate) and I love backpacking (that's me in the Badlands). I sleep far less than I ought to and eat far more than someone of my size ought to be able to. Feel free to contact me at daniel.kearns@case.edu

Jane Kacho Hi!

My name is Jane Kacho, and I am a senior here at the fine university of Case Western Reserve. I am majoring in psychology and minoring in childhood studies. I am from Pittsburgh, PA, and my interests include: sleeping, reading, sleeping and running (when I have the time!). After graduating this upcoming spring, I plan to attend graduate school to pursue a degree in education. The dual desire to adopt domestically and preserve a patrilineal system of kinship, however, produces an ever-present conflict of interests. In a culture that shuns unwed women who give birth, in addition to children born out of wedlock, domestic adoption proves difficult. Naturally, all parties involved are hesitant to label a cultural practice as 'bad', but as it stands, a firm commitment to a patrilineal system hinders S. Korea in many ways. The export of nearly 150,000 adoptees has left S. Korea hindered in terms of resources and manpower, while the reticence to allow anyone but the eldest son to inherit a position or business often hinders S. Korea's economical prosperity. As S. Korea enters the 21st century, its leaders must seriously consider the implications of their culture. As adoptees begin to raise their voices, one can only hope that S. Korea will strive to adapt its culture to the very real and serious presence of its children in need of domestic adoption. Culture runs deep within the hearts and minds of the Korean people. Like many of the Asiatic countries, Korean culture focuses almost solely on the family. This has made adoption in Korea a particularly unique situation, constantly exposing a conflict of interests within South Korea. During the 17th century, Korean culture assimilated much of Confucianism, including a strictly patrilineal system of kinship. The importance of blood relationship increased even further and inheritance was now traced solely through the father-son relationship. Adoption was a rarity. Following the Korean War, the number of
orphans and abandoned babies soared. For decades, the solution was simple: send the children to America and Europe, where thousands of parents were eager to adopt. Following the Seoul Olympics, however, S. Korea felt pressure from the world to decrease its number of international adoptions. The joking quote, “Korea’s largest export was babies” caused the S. Koreans to restructure the adoption process. Numbers have varied, and recent economic crisis have resulted in setbacks, but S. Korea is attempting to nullify international adoption by 2015, primarily by decreasing the number of international adoptions by a small percentage every year. The dual desire to adopt domestically and preserve a patrilineal system of kinship, however, produces an ever-present conflict of interests. In a culture that shuns unwed women who give birth, in addition to children born out of wedlock, domestic adoption proves difficult. Naturally, all parties involved are hesitant to label a cultural practice as ‘bad’, but as it stands, a firm commitment to a patrilineal system hinders S. Korea in many ways. The export of nearly 150,000 adoptees has left S. Korea hindered in terms of resources and manpower, while the reticence to allow anyone but the eldest son to inherit a position or business often hinders S. Korea’s economical prosperity. As S. Korea enters the 21st century, its leaders must seriously consider the implications of their culture. As adoptees begin to raise their voices, one can only hope that S. Korea will strive to adapt its culture to the very real and serious presence of its children in need of domestic adoption. – Dan Kearns

South Korea's government has continually come under severe criticism due to the large numbers of international adoptions from their country. In response to this, there have been several attempts to increase the number of domestic adoptions and thus decrease the number of international adoptions, but these efforts have largely been futile. There are several internal problems that continue to contribute to the failure of efforts to decrease numbers of international adoptions. The first is rapid industrialization. Industrialization has taken place so quickly in South Korea that it has led to the breakdown of traditional families as well as leading to urban migration and economic dislocation. Next, there is a profound absence of single family supports, generally stemming from government reluctance to create such programs, caused by the social stigma associated with single parents. Third, there is also a stigma towards domestic South Korean adoption. It is still generally seen as an unacceptable practice. Further, in Korean society, child abandonment generally is seen as acceptable. South Korea’s population control policies have also further aggravated the system and made international adoption a practical solution. One of the largest contributor’s to the problem is South Korea’s seeming inability or reluctance to create a child welfare program offering support services and funding and the government continually fails to provide adequate funds for the development of such programs. These difficulties are further compounded by the fact that the US continues to view South Korean adoptee’s as highly desirable, and the demand for such adoptable children continues, despite thousands of children available for adoption within the US. Until South Korea addresses these issues, there will likely continue to be a use of international adoption as an easy solution to a complex societal problem. – Jane Kacho

Cultural and Ethnic Identity

Identity: A Personal Account

I entered the world screaming on June 19th, 1984, in Seoul, South Korea. My biological mother, unemployed and unwed,
referred me for adoption and relinquished all parental rights before I was born. A day after my birth, I entered the care of Holt Children’s Services, Inc. and was placed in a foster home in Seoul. By July 19th, I was released to Pennsylvania; less than a month later, I was assigned to Joseph William Kearns. And less than ten weeks after my birth, I flew to the United States of America, where I was greeted by a new mother and father and a new older brother and sister. From the beginning, the question of identity plagued me. I do not remember being told I was adopted. Rather, from the earliest days of my memory, I can recollect knowing I was different: from my parents, siblings, friends and neighbors. The question was never, “Am I different?”, but rather, “How deep does this difference run?” And perhaps more importantly, “How will this difference affect my life?” As a young child, circumstances often left me perplexed as to how to answer these questions. At school, church and even home, it appeared to me as though most of those around me responded to my status as an adopted child by minimizing and almost ignoring the differences. At the same time, however, confusion often assailed me when I would bring up my adoption or the ways in which it had affected me. I can distinctly remember a day in 2nd grade, wherein I mentioned my birth name. Instantly, my teacher asked if I would prefer to be called by that name (Lee Yung Koo), and for a few weeks, my classmates referred to me as Lee. Growing up in rural Pennsylvania, I only knew of one other family with Korean children. Most of these children were girls and a good deal older than me; all were adopted. With equal distinction, I can remember the first time they informed me that they were not my sisters. For many years, they served as our babysitters, and because they were also adopted from Korea, and the only Koreans I had known, I simply assumed they were my sisters. Amidst my confusion and perplexity, I made my resolve. If I could not control where I came from, whom I was born to, and by whom I was adopted, I would control who I was becoming. My identity would be found in my future, in my potential. I found this to be the least confusing choice, because it was determined most significantly by my own doing. Thus, I tried to push away the differences of culture and ethnicity. The differences I embraced were those which I perceived to make me ‘better’ than others. I strove to be successful in school, music, sports; even in friendships with others. I began to view my older and younger brothers as competition. But before long, this world began to collapse. In an off-hand manner, a friend once told me in Jr. high, “You’re such a typical Asian. All you do is study and play piano.” At the time, I was shocked. For many years, my life had been driven by two goals: construct my own identity, and live my life in such a way that my birth mother would be proud of me. Ironically, perhaps, the very identity I had constructed was labeled with the identity I was trying to escape: Asian. At this point of my life, being ‘Asian’ seemed to denote being highly intelligent and successful, in addition to receiving respect and esteem from my peers, so I hesitantly embraced this vague identity. As I’ve begun to explore adoption through my classes at the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences here at Case Western Reserve University, I’ve made a number of personal realizations. The answer to the question of identity, whether assumed or formulated, is typically a construct. Admittedly, this construct may be created and molded by both nature and nurture; yet it remains nothing more than a construct. In recent years, I have often wondered how I would have reacted to being
adopted by a culturally and ethnically Asian family. Within a white family, I reacted to my differences by creating an identity strikingly Korean: I pursued academic success and retreated into a fairly non-emotional state. Within an Asian family, would I have acted out differently? Or would my Korean identity have always come to light? In any case, ethnicity and culture cannot escape being constructs of the human communities. I am not Korean because I exhibit many of the same characteristics of Koreans, nor do I exhibit these characteristics because I am Korean. Identity is typically not something to be discovered or recalled, so much as created and decided upon. Finally, the question of identity is fundamental to all human beings, not only adoptees. The question, perhaps, was more poignant to an Asian child growing up in a white culture, but the question remains equally critical to all. Do we find our identity in social or cultural constructs? Do we find our identity in those we love and those who love us? Do we find our identity in our own abilities, talents, dreams, and failures? I have argued that identity is typically a construct. And if we find our identity in any of the sources I listed above, I believe our identity is a construct. I also believe, however, that we have an even more fundamental identity that is not a construct. By the time I reached adolescence, I discovered my fundamental identity. Or perhaps, more accurately, my identity discovered me. My identity is not found in myself, my abilities, my past, my future, or my relationships with those around me. My identity is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ. “In Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28), and in Him we find our identity. The question of my identity cannot be answered by the blood in my veins, nor can it be answered by my biological or adoptive parents. The answer lies in my Heavenly Father. We were created as image-bearers of God and our identity remains in choosing and being chosen by Him. Admittedly, the tremors of my adoption will never fully cease. There are sleepless, tearful nights in which I long to see my birth mother. There are memories of insults and misconceptions, each accompanied by a scar. But with resounding confidence, I can answer the question, “Who am I?” I am the adopted son of God, heir to His inheritance, willing servant of my Master. – Dan Kearns Almost all adopted children experience some conflicts with identity. However, when a child is adopted internationally into a family which is of a different cultural orientation than that of his birth family, the very specific conflict between ethnic heritage and the dominant culture can arise. This conflict can take different forms in different stages throughout the life. The first stage comes around the ages of four to six, and this is where the child recognizes and rejects differences. Children of this age are still too young to grasp the idea of an ethnic identity, but they often will recognize that there is something different about their appearance. The second stage is the beginning of ethnic identification, and this takes place between the ages of seven and eight. The children start to vaguely grasp the idea of national identity, and may recognize the split that exists for them – identifying with the United States versus identifying with Korea. They can become curious and ask questions about where they came from. The third stage is acceptance of difference vs. ethnic dissonance, and this occurs between the ages of nine and eleven. At this stage, children can begin to integrate their two identities, and thus begin to identify themselves as Korean-American. Other children, however, feel a need to reject one of the ethnic identities, and this usually ends with the child thinking of himself
as American. The last stage is integrating Korean heritage and American culture, and this takes place between the ages of twelve to fourteen, a time when children are becoming fully capable of abstract thought. This can be a difficult time, because it is difficult for a child to reconcile the two very different cultures. However, some children still feel pride in their ethnic heritage, even while identifying with dominant American culture. At all of these stages, the influence of parents is important. Parents of Korean adoptees are encouraged to help their child develop a Korean ethnic identity from a young age. This can be accomplished in many ways: sending their child to Korean culture camps, cooking of Korean foods, becoming involved in local Korean associations, and countless other ways of integrating Korean identity into the child’s daily life. Some parents are uncomfortable with this, and, more importantly, some children are uncomfortable or simply not interested; it is important not to push these children, and parents must be attentive to the child’s level of interest in learning about his ethnic heritage. – Jane Kacho

South Korean international adoption practices began in the 1950s due to the increase in births of mixed racial children, often fathered by US soldiers, who either abandoned them or died, leaving these children with single mothers. As South Korean women usually did not work outside the home, these single mothers found it difficult to support themselves. To this point, orphaned children had usually been cared for by the paternal family, but in this case that was not a possible solution, and, beyond this, there was an incredibly negative stigma attached to mixed-race children, who were considered “unfit” for Korean society. For all of these reasons, and also because South Korea had no child welfare policy at the time, international adoption became a practical and attractive solution to a growing problem. Generally, the government formed partnerships with private agencies, usually in the United States, which was by far home to the largest number of placed children. At the time, paralleling South Korea’s own lack of child welfare services, few services were provided to any adopted children or adoptive parents. The Child Welfare Services agency was formed in Korea in 1954 to handle international adoption. Four years later, South Korea became the largest contributor to international adoptions worldwide. While initially it was only mixed race and orphaned children who were made available for international adoption, Korea’s lack of child welfare policy gradually made adoption of orphaned or abandoned same-race children an attractive solution to a growing problem, and by 1970 the practically all international adoptions were of same-race children. In 1961, South Korea passed the Orphan Adoption Special Law, which has since been revised several times. It has several provisions: only government licensed international adoption agencies are allowed to provide adoption services, child-centered procedures were established and placing agencies became allowed to charge a fee to adoptive parents. Eventually, South Korea began to come under severe criticism for their large numbers of international adoption, and in response the government has tried to implement programs to decrease the number of international adoptions while increasing the number of domestic adoptions. However, these efforts have generally failed, and adoption of South Korean children by US adoptive parents has remained a stable force. This is generally due to failures within the South Korean government to implement a well-developed child-welfare system. – Jane Kacho