

South Korea and Its Children

By [Hollee McGinnis](#)

I was 24 when I first returned to my birth country. Stepping onto the plane that would carry me back to a country I had left 21 years before, I felt dizzy at the convergence of my past and present. Once again I was the 3-year-old girl, traveling halfway around the world to an unknown future in a foreign land — now a woman returning, a foreigner again.

The Land of My Birth was a noisy, clamoring jumble of hip-hop music, televisions, CDs, movies, and billboards tumbling from the streets of Seoul. The South Korea I encountered was a fast-paced, modern, thriving nation choked with smog, street signs, cars and high-rise buildings. Where was the poverty? Where were all the abandoned children? This was not the third world country I had imagined — but it was not the Korea into which I'd been born.

Four years later, in 2000, I had the opportunity to travel with a group of adopted adults back to South Korea on a motherland visit. As part of the tour we visited a baby home in the southern city of Cheonju. All the children were under the age of 4 and, for various reasons, none were available for international adoption. It was then I began to truly understand my humble beginnings and the complexities of adoption as an intervention for children who have lost their primary caregivers.

As our bus pulled up to the orphanage and we stepped onto the paved playground, a row of little faces peered up through the doors, palms pressed against the glass in anticipation of our visit. Tears began to fall immediately as the adopted adults looked for and saw our own reflections in their tiny faces.



Children at Cheonju orphanage in 2000 waiting to greet the author and other visitors at the door. (Photograph by Hollee McGinnis)

At that time I had no training in child development or social work but I noted their behavior. I was struck by how little the children produced words. There was an eerie absence of kids' voices in the play room, filled instead by the chirping television. Some of the children recoiled from hugs. Others seemed to cling to my body, sucking the warmth and reassurance of human contact, if only for a few hours. A few would pierce me with their eyes and ignore me, seeming to know I would leave them like others had before.

It was clear that the caregivers at the orphanage cared for the children, but there were simply not enough of them to provide the individual attention each child needed. Looking at those children I could not help but think: *I got out.*

And it made me wonder: Why with all the wealth in Korea were these children here? What were their prospects growing up as orphans? And who were their advocates? Who could speak for their needs and best interests? Who would ensure that they would get to live to their full potentials — and not simply survive? I decided that I would.

By the time I completed my masters of science at Columbia University School of Social Work in 2003, I had learned why the children I had seen in the orphanage behaved the way they did. Current research on children in Romanian orphanages has provided unequivocal evidence of the detrimental effects of institutional care on a child's development.

The fact is the quality of caregiver-infant relationships in the first years of life may be more important than the quantity of nourishment in facilitating healthy human

development. In other words, children who experience the deprivation of a primary caregiver are at a greater risk for suffering from emotional, behavioral and cognitive problems that may impair their long-term ability to form healthy relationships, learn, or work in meaningful ways — a condition that can be remedied by the permanency of adoption.

Historically, intercountry adoption began as a humanitarian response to the immediate plight of children in the aftermath of armed conflicts, political and economic crises, and social upheavals. Although the first international adoptions occurred after the Second World War, it was the adoption of children — many born to Asian mothers and U.S. soldiers — at the end of the Korean War (1950-53) that initiated the widespread practice of international adoption known today.

South Korea has the longest running international adoption program and has sent the most children overseas for adoption than any other country in the world to date – 150,944 children between 1953 and 2006 according to official statistics from the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare. Of this total, 104,319 were adopted by American citizens constituting approximately one out of every ten Korean-Americans.

Today, it is being argued that South Korea has the economic wealth to take care of her own children and should abolish the practice of intercountry adoption. It has been trying. In 1996 the South Korean government revised its adoption law stipulating an annual decrease of international adoptions by 3 to 5 percent, with an eventual phasing out by 2015. Since then the number of Korean children sent overseas for adoption has hovered around 2,000 children annually.

As in the past, these changes reflect broader social and political realities. South Korea's intercountry adoption program has historically been tied to its population problems. Unlike the past, Korea now faces low population growth at the same time it is encouraging domestic adoptions. In 2006 the government rolled out a five-year welfare strategy to tackle the country's low birth rates. It includes financial incentives to adults who choose to adopt and give birth. And as of January 2007, children available for adoption must wait at least five months for a possible domestic placement before being considered for intercountry adoption.

Despite these efforts, of the 9,420 children available for adoption in 2005, only 1,461 were adopted domestically while 2,101 children were allowed to be adopted overseas. So what happened to the nearly 6,000 children who did not get adopted domestically or abroad?

According to statistics of the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare the number of children entering orphanages has risen from 17,675 in 2004 to 19,000 in 2007 with about 800 to 900 18-year-olds every year aging out of the system with little housing, educational, or vocational support. As in the U.S. foster care system, these children get to remain in their country of origin but with little opportunity to reach their full potential.

Today, birth mothers in Korea do not have a level playing field because the choice for a single, unwed mother to parent simply does not exist — not only because the government provides only nominal financial support to single mothers, but because the entire society rejects them.

Not so long ago in America we treated our single, unwed mothers in quite the same way. It took Americans 20 years and a women's movement before we transformed old attitudes and beliefs; I would think it will take South Korea at least that much time and they are already making some progress.

In a nation where one in three South Korean parents are willing to send their children abroad for the sake of a better education, it does not surprise me that intercountry adoption has remained entrenched in society. And I hope it will continue.

South Koreans have often felt shame for its long history of international adoption, but we in the United States also allow some of our children to be adopted overseas, an estimated 500 annually. Mostly these are children voluntarily relinquished by their parents to mostly other Western nations. But Americans also adopt on average in any given year 50,000 children from our domestic foster care system, a far greater number than the current rate of domestic adoption in South Korea.

Ultimately, the challenge is how to balance the need to respect a child's right to his or her ethnic identity and cultural background against the known detrimental effects caused by early deprivation of a primary caregiver. Such issues and others were discussed at length at the recent "[Adoption Ethics and Accountability: Doing it Right Makes a Lifetime of Difference](#)," conference held in October and co-sponsored by the [Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute](#) where I work as the policy director.

Personally, I am not for adoption or against it. I can see its value and also its limitation. What I am for are choices. The argument for me is not whether international adoption should be abolished or promoted, but rather how to maximize options for children so that all can reach their full potential, be it with those who bore them or those willing to adopt them at home or abroad, or for those children who have no option but to grow up in an institution.