

South Korea's troubled export: babies for adoption

Jon Herskovitz Fri May 25, 7:34 PM ET

SEOUL (Reuters) - An Olympic hero reminds

[South Korea](#) of the pain of exporting its children, while an actress expounds the joys of parenthood and the government the rewards. But South Koreans still don't like adopting other people's children.

South Korea marked its home-grown adoption day earlier this month with incentives to encourage domestic adoption, telling citizens of the world's 12th largest economy its orphanages should not be filled with abandoned children.

But despite a sense of disgrace for once being one of Asia's largest providers of babies for adoption abroad, it has struggled to overcome ingrained attitudes about fostering them at home.

"Koreans have viewed adoption as something very shameful, embarrassing and fearful," said Stephen Morrison, an activist with a group called Mission to Promote Adoption in Korea.

A system of carefully kept family registries -- which normally go back several centuries -- places a premium on preserving blood lines and so discourages bringing in outsiders.

Those South Koreans who do adopt, often do so secretly. A wife might leave for the countryside, returning months later with an adopted child she says she gave birth to.

Morrison, himself a Korean adopted overseas, said attitudes have changed slightly over the past few years. Now, about a third of South Korean couples adopting children are willing to go public compared to almost none in the late 1990s.

Actress Sin Ae-la openly adopted a daughter in 2005 and the press coverage helped spur domestic adoptions in South Korea.

INCENTIVES AND ORPHANS

Olympic skier Toby Dawson is a reminder of South Korea's failure to adopt its own.

Dawson, born in South Korea and adopted by American ski instructors, became an overnight sensation in South Korea when he won a bronze medal at the Turin Olympics in 2006.

Since then, he had a tearful reunion in February 2007 with his biological father and is helping the South Korean city of Pyeonchang with its bid for the 2014

Winter Olympics.

Thousands of babies are still abandoned every year due to divorce, economic hardship and the difficulty of raising children in a society that sometimes looks on single mothers with scorn.

In a bid to spur domestic adoption, the government has pledged to cut adoption fees and subsidize medical care.

"We now have the ability to take care of abandoned children and orphans within our borders," said Kim Geum-chan, a welfare ministry official.

Since 1958, when orphans from the Korean War and the abandoned children of foreign soldiers and Korean women began to be taken in by overseas families, about 160,000 South Korean children have been adopted abroad, the welfare ministry said.

Well over half of them ended up in the United States.

In the years leading up to the 1988 Olympics when South Korea was emerging as an economic power, it sent about 8,500 children a year abroad for adoption -- a statistic which became a national embarrassment. Now, the number is a little under 2,000 a year.

At Holt Children's Services in Seoul, rosy-faced babies who will likely soon be leaving South Korea, wait in a toy-strewn room for health checks with doctors.

Holt, named after Oregon farmer Harry Holt who adopted eight Korean war orphans in the 1950s, is one of the few international adoption agencies sanctioned by the government.

"I feel so proud and happy when I see pictures of those children with their new families and they are happy and healthy," said Holt spokeswoman Kim Eun-hee.

But some child welfare advocates want to halt international adoptions, saying they leave children emotionally scarred and in search of an identity.

"It is just not right that one of the world's biggest economies is still sending its abandoned babies overseas," said Jeon Soon-geol from the Mission to Promote Adoption in Korea