Babies for sale. South Koreans make them, Americans buy them
by Matthew Rothschild
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Seoul, South Korea. Five pregnant women sleep on blankets on the tile floor of a small room. They keep their personal belongings in three wooden closets on one wall above their feet. This is home, at least until the babies come. The dormitory is called Ae Ran Won, and it is one of a dozen homes for unmarried women in South Korea. Ae Ran Won can hold fifty pregnant women in its ten rooms, but when I was there in November, it had only thirty-five. These women supply the raw material for a peculiar South Korean business: the export of babies to the United States. U.S. families are adopting 6,000 Korean children a year, most of them infants, at a price of about $5,000 a head.

Korea is by far the largest supplier of foreign babies for the U.S. adoption market; 62 percent of all babies adopted from abroad are South Korean. That amounts to 10 percent of the total adoptions in the United States by families unrelated to the adoptees. Many of the babies come from unwanted mothers' homes, about 250 a year from Ae Ran Won alone. At first, the women do not want to give up their babies. According to the questionnaire that we distribute at the orientation interview, 90 percent want to keep the babies, says Kim Yongsook, the director of Ae Ran Won. But after counseling, maybe 10 per cent will keep them. We suggest that it's not a good idea to keep the baby without the biological father, explains Kim Yong Sook, and if the unwed mother and biological father are too young or too weak financially, we suggest that they give the baby up for adoption. We can't push, we can suggest.

After delivery at a hospital, the baby is taken from the mother and given to one of four adoption agencies licensed by the South Korean government. The agencies then place the baby with a foster mother until an American or European family can be found to adopt it. For some of the Korean mothers, the experience hurts. Just after delivery, they are very upset, says Kim Yong Sook, who was a social worker and an unwed mothers' counselor for eleven years for Holt Children's Services, the largest adoption agency in Korea, before joining Ae Ran Won. They have guilt feelings and avoidance feelings. I'd like to see my baby again, they say. Sometimes they have bad dreams. They miss the baby and have a lot of pain. Most of the mothers are poor women from low-paying factory or clerical jobs. They do not receive payment for their babies, though medical expenses - including delivery costs - are picked up by the adoption agency that takes the baby. Ae Ran Won provides free room and board for up to a year, free vocational training, and as much as $100 to help the mother adjust when she leaves Ae Ran Won. Like most of the homes for unwed expectant mothers, Ae Ran Won is supported by the Korean government, the adoption agencies, and charitable donations. On the other side of Seoul, at the end of a narrow open-air fruit and vegetable market in a poor section of town, a two-year-old boy pees in the street and a mangy white dog prowls about. Two houses down is Sung Ro Won Babies' Home, an orphanage for infants under three. It, too, is a supplier for the U.S. market. The orphanage, which had 106 infants when I visited, turns over at least that number each year to Holt and other agencies for foreign adoption. Almost all are abandoned and brought here by the Seoul police, says Kim Chong Chan, the superintendent of the babies's home. Some kids are waiting now, in jail or some other place. Son Migu was born on December 8, 1986, and was abandoned in a motel that same day. She has a pony tail standing straight up on the top of

herhead. Dressed in a pink frilled shirt and white thermal stockings, she sits up in one of the twenty-four white crated cribs that crowd the room. All are occupied. In one month, Son Migu will go to her American family. In a nearby room, eleven girls who are two-and-a-half sing Kumbaya, My Lord. Some clutch my blue blazer. Ten boys in the next room greet me in unison, then some call me "appah" or dad. They bring out brown envelopes with pictures of Americans. Kim Chong Chan goes over the photos with them, explaining about their new parents.

Kim Chong Chan takes me to his office. On his desk, under the glass top, is a long poem from a grateful American couple, praising God for sending such a wonderful child: He picked up out baby; "Our daughter so fine/And delivered her to us Via Northwest Airlines."

Adoption from South Korea began in 1955 when Harry Holt, a born again Christian from Eugene, Oregon, went to Korea and adopted eight war orphans. For the next decade, most of the children adopted from Korea were fathered by American soldiers who fought in the Korean war. But Amerasians now account for fewer than 1 per cent of the adoptees. Today, Korea is exporting its own. Korean babies are high-quality commodities, says one observer, who opposes the practice of foreign adoption but wants to remain anonymous so that he won't be persecuted by the Korean government. Nam Kyongkyun is less timid. It's time for us to stop it, she says. An instructor of social work at the Methodist Theological Seminary in Seoul, Nam headed the Tai-Wan Christian Social Center for twelve years. She has dealt with the private nonprofit adoption agencies first hand, and she claims they care more about money than about the babies or the mothers. For the agencies, it's a business, she says. The four agencies, in order of size, are Holt Childrens' Services, Eastern Social Service, Social Welfare Society, and Korea Social Service. Beside adoption work, they all provide care for handicapped children. But it is the foreign adoptions that keep the agencies going. Holt and Eastern are avowedly Christian organizations, and they make every effort to place Korean babies in Christian homes. Holt especially stresses its fundamentalist, evangelical faith. We like to place with a Christian family, but we don't enforce that, says the Reverend Yoon Jaesung, secretary general of Holt Children's Services in Korea. Holt International Children's Services in Eugene, Oregon, is a legally separate entity form Holt Korea. The Korean organization split form the parent organization more than ten years ago, but it still maintains close ties. According to Holt International 1986 annual report, the American agency provided $2 million in financial support to its Korean namesake. And in 1986, Holt Korea placed 924 children in American families through Holt International accounting for 90 per cent of Holt International's placements from foreign countries.

Holt International also emphasizes the importance of Christian families. "If you adopt a child through Holt International, you will be asked for your statement of faith, " states a Holt handbook: Adoption. A Family Affair. "It is our personal desire that these children go into Christian homes. "We want to let these children we serve come to know Jesus." One out of four persons in Korea is Christian, and the Korean adoption law requires adoptive parents to recognize the freedom of religion of the adoptive child. The Korean government closely regulates the adoption agencies. Indeed, they are quasi-governmental institutions. The government approves their budgets, scrutinizes each adoption application, sets informal quotas on the number of children to be adopted through each agency, and helps select the heads of the three largest agencies. Foreign adoptions serve many purposes for the government. First, they bring in needed hard currency - roughly $15 to $20 million a year. Second, they relieve the

government of the costs of caring for the children, which could be a drain on the budget. Third, they help with population control, an obsession of the Korean government. And finally, they solve a difficult social problem: What to do with orphans and abandoned children?

Birth control is inexpensive and accessible in Korea and abortions -though technically illegal - are widespread and accepted. Still, the problem of unwanted children persists. In 1986, South Korea had 18,700 orphaned or abandoned children. Almost half were sent abroad for adoption, 70 per cent of these to the United States, the rest to Canada, Australia, and eight European nations. "We have many children from unwed mothers, but few families who want to adopt," says Park Yon-soo, director general of the Bureau of Family Affairs in the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. "That's why we send our children to foreign families."

Critics and proponents alike agree that Korea's patrilineal culture is hostile to domestic adoption and discriminates against unwed mothers and their offspring. Unwed mothers are stigmatized by family and community and they may not be able to get a job or find a husband. This is the social spur to foreign adoptions. "Korea is a very blood-oriented society," says Park, who oversees the adoption program for the Korean Government. "Koreans do not want to adopt a child unrelated by blood, and if they do, they don't want anyone to know. For the last several years, the Korean government has urged the adoption agencies to increase domestic adoptions.

From the 1976 to 1978, it even imposed quotas on the agencies. But the program did not succeed. "Domestic adoptions are not that active," Park says. About 3,000 children were adopted in Korea in 1986. Park has some misgivings about the volume of foreign adoptions, especially since it has handed the North Koreans a propaganda bonanza. "We are very concerned about the numbers," he says. In the 1970s, the North Koreans spoke ill about the numbers, about Korea selling its children abroad. We don't want to be involved in that again. Yet the numbers have increased dramatically. In fiscal 1981, American families adopted 2,444 Koreans, according to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). In fiscal 1986, they adopted 6,254. The demand from the United States if fueling the business. One out of every twelve married couples in the United States is infertile, the U.S. Center for Health Statistics reports. The domestic supply of babies up for adoption simply cannot keep up with the demand.

"Two million couples would like to adopt in this country," says Jefrey Rosenberg, the director of public policy for the National Committee for Adoption. "And there are only 20,000 healthy children available for adoption. That's a 100-to-1 ratio." The supply is so coveted that the Community Adoption Center in Madison, Wisconsin, has sponsored a Healthy White Infant Lottery. The entry fee is $300, but the winner still has to pay $5000. Because of the tight domestic market, Americans are increasingly looking abroad for children, and foreign adoptions are booming. "It's the highest it's ever been, says Rosenberg. "It's the fastest area of adoption growth in this country." Nowhere is it faster than in South Korea. You got big bugs here. You're talking dollars, say Robert Ackerman, the INS officer in charge at the U.S. embassy in Seoul. "I see much potential for hanky-panky."

The adoption agencies in Korea collect about $2,000 a child right off the top. Then they charge American families $1,000 for transportation of the child to the United States. (A one-way coach fare from Seoul to Chicago cost $700, and the agencies receive a discount from the airlines. They

also collect a donation of between $250 and $400 from each "escort" who travels with the baby on the plane; the agency picks up the airfare for the escort.) The adoption-placement agency in the United States then charges about $1,500 for its services. Add another $500 for legal paperwork and miscellaneous processing, and the total comes to $5,000. Often, this is several hundred dollars more.

Ackerman combs each adoption application to make sure everything is on the up and up. He is a direct and forceful man, and he's been known to terrify social workers from the adoption agencies with his gruff manner. "He rejects too many applications," complains Dr. Kim Do-young, executive director of Eastern Child Welfare Society, the second largest adoption agency in Korea. The adoption business troubles Ackerman. "I get bothered by it," he says. "Five hundred kids a month is incredibly high number for just a humanitarian issue. One has to question where humanitarianism stops and business begins." He has heard allegations of mothers being bribed to give up their babies, but in this five years at the embassy he's never been able to confirm them. "It would be very disturbing if they ere buying babies from parents," he says. But Korea is not like El Salvador, Mexico, or Sri Lanka, where a black market in babies seems to flourish. In Korea, it is more institutionalized, efficient, and above board.

Virtually from conception, the adoption agencies have established a system of guaranteeing a steady supply of healthy children. They support pregnant women's homes; in fact, three of the four agencies run their own. One of the agencies has its own maternity hospital and does its own delivery. All four provide and subsidize child care. All pay foster mothers about $80 a month to care the infants, and the agencies provide the food and the clothing and other supplies free of charge. And they support orphanages, or operate them themselves. When the time for departures arrives, the babies are flown to their foreign families, escorted by strangers who wait in line for their discount airfares. "I've had to ask myself, do we really have baby factory here?," Ackerman says. He also has asked himself whether some of religiously oriented agencies were viewing adoptions as a quick means of spreading the gospel, a head start on proselytizing. "it's crossed my mind," he says, but the agencies don't insist on strict applications of their religions standards. "There is a broad cross-section of adoptive parents, as far as a variety of religious goes."

For all his doubts, Ackerman comes out in favor of the adoption agencies. "On balance, it's probably more humane to allow them to stay in business," he says. "They are probably doing a service to the baby, the mother, and the adoptive parents." What's more, he says, adoptions from Korea are more regulated and less expensive than adoptions from other foreign countries. To a great extent, the social workers are the heavies. They are hired by the adoption agencies and the pregnant-women's homes to persuade mothers to give up their children."

Most mothers are relieved, "but some have guilty sense their whole life," says Chun Byunghoon, one of the four adoption agencies. "It's a very sad story, you know. Some girls want to keep their children, but the social worker persuades her that's impossible, so she gives up the child." One social worker couldn't take it any longer. She was employed by one of the four adoption agencies for several years, and she was appalled by the increasing callousness and the competition. "It's really like dealing with a product instead of taking care of the mother and the child," the social worker told me, speaking on condition that she would be not be identified. "Our weekly staff meetings were all about numbers: How many babies did we get that week? The numbers were

the most important thing. It never used to be so sad," she says. Before, agencies would work hard on their "sponsorship" programs; they would solicit charitable donations from Koreans and foreigners to care for the child in Korea. Not any longer. "What's really happened is there is no interest in the sponsorship program," she says. "There's too much competition for babies."

This social worker had the unenviable task of taking the baby from the mother right at the hospital. "I was assigned to seven hospitals and clinics, and I was supposed to cultivate them," she says. "Any time there were notified and I'd go to the hospital. I would talk to the mothers, and ask them to sign the papers." Money did change hands. "I would pay the doctor for her medical fees and ask the doctor to pay the mother," she says. "In some cases, the doctor would tell me to give the money directly to the mother." The amount varied widely; sometimes it was just enough to pay the mother's bus fare back home. Finally she quit. "As a trained social worker," she says, "I could no longer continue what was economic, with very little thought about the mother and the child and what was happening to them."

Payments are routine to maternity hospitals, midwives, obstetricians, officials at each of the four agencies acknowledged. The agencies will cover the costs of delivery and the medical care for any woman who gives up her baby for adoption. "We pay for our girl," say the Reverend Yoon Jaesung, secretary general of Holt, referring to the woman Holt sends to the hospital from its counseling service or from its affiliated pregnant-women's home. And if hospitals send other babies over Holt," we'll give them a little help." The agencies also use their influence with hospitals, and with the police, to acquire abandoned children. "The agencies have all the connections with the hospitals and the police stations," says Dom Yano Park, who help run Seoul Boystown with Father Aloysius Schwartz. Seoul Boystown is one of the largest orphanage in Korea, housing 2,500 children between the ages of three and fifteen.

Under photographs showing Nancy Reagan visiting Seoul Boystown, Dom Yano Park explains how the agencies work. "They constantly try to get the babies from hospitals and the police," he says. "They are so desperate to get babies to meet the demand, to fill the demand from the American side." Hospitals and the police oblige, Dom Yano Park says, by handing over abandoned children to the agencies. Then, when mothers come to Boystown looking for their children, they are nowhere to be found. Dom Yano Park opposes foreign adoption and objects to the practices of the adoption agencies. "If charity work is carried out so perfectly and mechanically in the business style," he says, "it loses the essence of charity."

Father Benedict Zweber sees things differently. He is the director of St. Vincent«s orphanage in Inchon, one hour west of Seoul. He lives and works out of a tiny office, just barely a room with only a desk, a small cabinet and a single bed. These are his temporary quarters while a new building is being completed. A tennis racket dangles from the ceiling, a crucifix stands above his bed, and a WE LOVE FATHER BEN poster hangs over his desk. As I talk to him, three young boys enter. One sits on his lap and one on mine. "I work with hard-to-place kids and try to place them," he says as five more boys squeeze in. "Babies are high demand. It doesn't take any work to place them." He accepts any children between the age of three to fifteen. His only condition is that they come with documents freeing them up to adoption. "It's better for those kids to get into homes than to raise them in orphanages in Korea," he says. "It's so much better that they go." Father Zweber has taken on the toughest tasks of adoption: planing older children and sibling

groups. "We make it a policy not to break up siblings," he says, adding proudly that he has placed up to five siblings with a single family in the United States. Every year, he visits the United States and Canada to see how the children are doing. "We've probably sent 1,200 kids," he says, "and there isn't one who is having a lot of problems. They have problems - all kids have problems - but they fit in pretty well."

He knows that the adoption program is controversial, but he supports it enthusiastically. "I find it hard to criticize anybody who's placing a kid overseas," he says. One thing does bother him, however. "I don't like an agency giving out money to hospitals and clinics," he says. "That's inviting people to abandon kids. It could lead to very big corruption." Father Zweber was assigned to Korea in 1959, and he has been working with children in the Inchon area since 1965. He feels a personal be to the country since his brother, who fought in the Korean War, drowned in the Han river shortly afterward. "Koreans were very good to my mother and the family," he says. In a way, he sees himself repaying that debt of kindness. "It's very, very rewarding work," he says softly. "To take street kids whose chances of surviving for more than five years are very, very small and then to see them go to college in the United States. Some of these kids come in as very rough diamonds." Molly Holt founder Harry Holt's oldest living daughter. She stills works at Ilsan, the home for handicapped children that her father established in 1964. It has 300 permanent residents now. Though her primary concern is with these handicapped children and the institution run by Holt Korea, she strongly supports the international adoptions. "Those who are opposed to these adoption are people from upper strata of society," she says. "Of course, it's better if a child stays with its own family. Of course, it's better if a child is adopted by Korean family. But as yet, we don't have enough families, and it's better for a country to allow its children to seek families abroad than to have the children warehoused."

Once they get to the United States, some Korean adoptees face problems. Like other adopted children, they have to come to terms with their identity. But these identity problems are compounded for these children adopted from abroad. "Youngsters who come from different countries who speak different languages and belong to different races, have several more hurdles to clear," says Lou Simmons, assistant director of the Lane County juvenile department in Eugene Children's Services. "When they're young, they're cute and cuddly. When they grow up, they're going to have problems with discrimination," says Simmons, who eighteen years ago adopted an Eskimo when the child was two-and-a-half. The Eugene area, because of the presence of Holt, has had an unusually high number of Korean children. "We've seen some of them fail," Simmons says. "Often-times, parents adopt kids because they want a baby. But babies want to grow up, and when they get to be pubescent and adolescent, some people throw them away."

Hendrickson has been a social worker for twenty-three years for the Lane County Children's services department. She, too, has seen many Korean adoptees. "By and large, they've assimilated well," she says. "It's been good life for them. Racism is an issue," Hendrickson acknowledges. The irony, though, is that it affects American Black adoptees more severely than adopted Koreans. "The Korean kids do have some problems, but not as much as the black kids," says Hendrickson. "This society is more accepting of Korean children than blacks. It's too bad; there's something terrible in this society in the way it views blacks. I kept hearing from adopting parents when they were applying for a child: "Any race but black," "Any race but black." The general rule is the lighter the skin, the easier the time the kid has. Black social workers in the

United States strongly oppose the adoption of black children by white families. They view it as a form of cultural genocide. "We are opposed to transracial adoptions," says Janice Shindler, associate director of the Association of Black Social Workers Child-Adoption and Referral Service. "We feel black children should be placed with black families in order to maintain their cultural identity and to develop mechanisms to survive in this country." Some Koreans have similar concerns. "As a nation, we must look after the children who are born in this land," says Kim Oknah, president of the Korean association for Volunteer Effort. "It is very, very disturbing that Korea allows its children to be sent off to foreign countries," she says.

The human-rights organization for children, Defense for Children International, is split on this issue. "It's a crazy area," says Mike Jupp, the executive director of the U.S. branch. "The North American, Swedish, and Finnish people say there are kids who are being abandoned and neglected and need a home, whereas the representative from Third World countries view it as a further example of exploitation of their natural resources. The West, they say, took their sugar, their coal, their bauxite, their gold, and their silver, and now it is taking their babies." Certainly, the culture identity of the adopted children of American society. "One of the miracles of this program is the rapid and good adjustment of these kids into American culture," says Michael Short, an adoption specialist with the Lutheran Social Services in Milwaukee, which places Korean children with the U.S. families. "In six months, they have some language skills. In a couple of years, they are grade appropriate and Americanized."

Adoption placement agencies in the United States differ as to how much time American adopting parents should devote to stressing Korean culture. For instance, the national Committee for adoption promotes a book called Oriental Children in American homes, by Frances Koh, which offers eight tips on how to handle this issue. Among Koh's suggestions: "Teach her about her country's history and heroes-but don't overemphasize them. After all, you're rearing her as an American, and her big holiday, like yours, will be the Fourth of July. "Wear a perfume that includes the flower of her country and keep a pot pourri of native spices in a basket on her bureau. Cooking with these spices will also carry the smells through the house. "Buy her a Rice Paddy Baby, a sort of Asian Cabbage Patch doll. She won't care that it comes with its own passport, but she will like having a doll that looks like she does." The U.S. Government has a double standard. While it allows Americans to adopt babies in foreign countries, it does not allow foreigners to adopt babies born in the United States.

Not every Thirld World country places it babies on the export ramp. North Korea, for instance, prohibits it. And some First World countries don't let their citizens adopt from abroad: Great Britain and Japan have laws against it. In South Korea, however, the adoption business is so efficient that it perpetuates itself. It serves as a sort of safety valve for the social problems of unwed mothers and abandoned children. Rather than address the discrimination against unwed mothers and orphans, the society simply strips the one and exports the other. That's why some Korean social workers want to put a stop to foreign adoptions. As alternatives, they say, unwed mothers could be supported by the government instead of shunned. And the government could make a more aggressive effort at promoting in-country adoptions. "I haven't heard the government appeal to the people to adopt Korean children," says Kim Oknah of the Korean Association for Volunteer Effort. "I haven't seen anything on television, radio, or in the

newspapers, and I've lived in this country all my life. If the government had a special campaign on this issue, the Korean people would follow gradually."

The babies are crying. United Flight 876 from Kimpo International Airport to San Francisco and Chicago is taking off with five Korean infants aboard, ranging from three to eight months old. They come from Holt Children's Services, and they are headed for Baltimore. "I'm just the escort," says Kim J.D., who seems frazzled by the responsibility of keeping track of the infants with two other Korean adults. "This is my third time." Kim gave Holt a donation of about $250, and the agency paid for his one-way ticket. He just met the five infants that afternoon at Holt headquarters in Seoul. Many of the women passengers take turns consoling and cuddling the infants. "She's so cute, one woman says. "I wish I could keep her." "Don't fall too much in love," the stewardess responds. "They already belong to someone."