

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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ARISSA OH is an associate professor of history at Boston College, where she teaches and researches migration in U.S. history, particularly in relation to race, gender, and kinship. She spoke with the Boisi Center program director **Suzanne Hevelone** about her book, *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption*.

HEVELONE: In the introduction, you talk a little bit about your grandmother being separated from your grandfather during the Korean War with small children. Was that where the idea came from to write about the origins of international adoption and the influence of the Korean War?

OH: When I started graduate school, I wanted to study race and immigration in U.S. history, and that was pretty much all I really knew. My adviser suggested that I look into what she called “war orphans.” So it was something that I came to because of my interests in migration and race. It was completely separate from my personal history.

I wanted to study Asian migration. I thought I would end up studying Korean Americans, but I didn’t want to tell the story of my family. I didn’t want it to be this autobiographical academic study. As I’ve been studying Korean adoption, I’ve realized that Korean Americans don’t have to look far to find adoptees in their families or connections to people who were adopted.

Even my own grandmother will say, “There but for the grace of God go I.” She was effectively widowed during the war. She lost my mother briefly in Seoul Station once when she let go of her hand. My grandmother would say, “anything could

have happened to me, and your mom and your uncle could have ended up adopted.” You don’t have to look very far to see a connection with adoption.

HEVELONE: The phenomenon of international adoption is fascinating. In particular, the evolution from stranger adoption, which you say in your book arose in the beginning of the 20th centu-



ry, to international adoption post-World War II. What shifted both culturally and politically that opened Americans, and the rest of the world, up to international adoption?

OH: International adoption is a pretty American phenomenon. Other people do adopt internationally, but systematic international adoption is American in its roots.

It comes out of the Cold War, and the United States recognizing itself as a superpower, recognizing that it has a spe-

cial role in the world because it’s chosen by God. It has to embrace a certain kind of leadership and there are geopolitical gains to be made by being a benevolent leader of the world in a way that the Soviet Union was allegedly not.

One of the reasons why Americans become interested in international adoption is a Cold War understanding of America having a special responsibility to care for the rest of the world. But the more geo-strategic goal is to win hearts and minds in Asia: Let’s win hearts and minds in decolonizing countries that have to pick between the U.S. and the USSR, and the way that we can win their hearts and minds is to show that we are kinder and gentler.

In addition to the ideological shift, there’s also the fact that, during the Cold War, being a good parent is equated with being a good U.S. citizen. It is thought that there is something especially deviant about people who don’t have children.

As a result, the practice of domestic adoption becomes more popular, but the supply, the pool of children that are available domestically, is insufficient. It never was really sufficient throughout the 20th century, but the supply and demand gap was particularly huge after World War II, because there was a mandate to have a family—and a corresponding mandate

to adopt if you couldn't produce children biologically.

Americans see adopting internationally as a way to complete their families. One way that they could convince lawmakers to help them adopt internationally was by using the Cold War language of helping other countries. It's impossible to say this is the actual motivation. There were also a certain number of parents who said, "We just really wanted a baby, and there were babies in Korea." But that's not what they said to lawmakers.

HEVELONE: Could you define Christian Americanism and its role in the rise of Korean adoption?

OH: White American couples in the 1950s who wanted to adopt from Korea used two kinds of rhetoric, nationalistic language and religious language, and it was very hard to separate the two languages. They were uttered in the same sentence. In general, in the 1950s, you have a rise of public religiosity in the United States: everybody goes to church, we pledge allegiance, we add under God, the National Prayer Breakfast is inaugurated.

Christian Americanism is the term that I came up with to describe the ways that adoptive families brought nationalistic and religious goals together to argue for the adoption of Korean children. They never just said this is good for the Cold War agenda. Many of them did say, "This is because we're Christians." Harry Holt is the prime example of people who said adoption is only about saving children for God. But, if we're thinking in terms of concentric circles, the next circle out from the evangelical Christians like him is where people—politicians, the public, journalists—are trying to find traction for the adoption of Korean children. They bring together an evangelical Christianity with Cold War concerns that find broader appeal. Christian Americanism is my term to describe that.

Not everybody was a Christian Americanist in the 1950s. Harry Holt, for example, never talked about national purposes. He was only fixated on religious purposes.

Christian Americanism uses a very particular language that advocates of Korean adoption used until they got the permanent laws passed, when Christian Americanism dissipated. Once they got what they wanted, which is international

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adoption being a permanent part of U.S. immigration law, they didn't need to fight so hard anymore.

HEVELONE: Do you think today's anti-immigrant/refugee sentiment in the United States will have an effect on international adoption in the future?

OH: The interesting thing about international adoption is that the adoption of foreign children has always remained separate from immigration debates. Orphans are seen as an exceptional category.

Even in the 1950s, when the United States was trying to construct refugee laws, there was a lot of concern about adult refugees—that they were subversives or communists. But children—even though they were also coming in under refugee laws—were considered to be obviously innocent and free of that baggage. Nobody really protested visas being made available for orphans in the 1950s.

Recently, one issue that has arisen is that hundreds or thousands of internationally adopted people were never naturalized by their parents. Adoptees have discovered that they don't have U.S. citizenship. Some of the parents didn't naturalize the children because they didn't know they had to. Some of them didn't do it on purpose.

Last year, there was a well-publicized case about a Korean adoptee [Adam Gasper] who was adopted in the 1970s at the age of three. He and his sister were adopted together. At their first home, they were abused, so they were re-homed—sent to another adoptive family—and they were separated. The second family was also abusive.

As a teenager, the adoptee got into trouble—petty theft, that kind of thing—and he found out far too late that he was not a U.S. citizen. Because of post-9/11 immigration crackdowns that basically don't allow any tolerance for certain classes of people who are residents but not citizens, he was deported. He's 43 years old. He has four children, U.S. born, natural-born citizens, but he was deported to a country that he left when he was three, where he doesn't know the language.

This is a long way of saying that some immigration reform and some of the restrictions that we're seeing now is affecting people who are adult adoptees. There are probably more people who are going to be deported, just like there are other people who came here as young children who are being deported for other reasons.

In terms of Syrian children being adopted, there is a general overall decline in international adoptions. You don't see Americans offering to adopt Syrian children in the same way that you've seen them offer to adopt Haitian children after the earthquake, or tsunami orphans after the tsunami in the Pacific. That same surge has not met the Syrian refugee crisis.

HEVELONE: In your book, you describe the International Adoption Complex. What problems does this cause?

OH: The pattern of the international adoption complex is that some kind of war or natural disaster occurs, and the international adoption agencies and humanitarian agencies come in and gather children into orphanages to be sent overseas for adoption.

One of the major problems is that they don't necessarily check to see if the children are actually orphans. This was a major problem in Haiti where children who were not orphans at all were being scooped up and taken out of the country. A group of evangelical Baptists from Idaho tried to take these children into the Dominican Republic and were arrested. The orphan status of the children was not confirmed, which they justified by saying, "It was an emergency and we just wanted to save the children." But once you airlift children out of a country or cross a border with them, it's very difficult to take them back.

Over time, after things become more stabilized, you have the establishment of orphanages. The orphanages are wealthier than the surrounding community because they're the recipients of lots of foreign sponsorship money. The relative wealth of the orphanage induces poor families, who have historically used orphanages as childcare facilities, to bring their children to the orphanage, not necessarily for permanent relinquishment, but as long-term care or as a place where they can get an education.



Once the children are in the orphanage, pressure starts to build for the parents to relinquish the child. So that is also one of the feedback loops that develop. I think all of this is starting to change slowly because this has happened in so many countries, and so people are starting to recognize that this is a danger.

HEVELONE: You talk about the fact that there's been a preference for girls in adoptions traditionally. Why do you think that is? Does it persist to this day?

OH: People have historically wanted girls because they think they're easier to raise, which is, of course, not true at all. Studies have shown that when men have biological children, they want sons. So there's something there about patriarchy or siring a son that is operating. People can accept a girl that's not biologically their own, but if there's a boy, they want that boy to be from their seed.

I also think there is a way in which little girls—especially little Asian girls—are just seen as completely not threatening. They're like dolls. They're very cute.

The flip side of this in Korea is that boys are preferred over girls because of the way that the lineage system works, although this is changing now. So throughout the history of international adoption, girls have been more available.

As international adoption goes around the world, to China for example, more girls are available.

HEVELONE: Related to this idea of a bias towards adopting doll-like girls, is there a sort of objectification that can be involved in international adoption?

OH: It's certainly part of the reason why certain countries are more popular than other countries. The most obvious example of this gender bias is China, when you have all of these girls that are available and western families rush in. Some want to make a statement about sexism, such as, "This appalling country doesn't want its girls, but we want their girls." There is a "China doll" kind of conversation that happens too. And the persistent conceptualization of Asian Americans as a model minority also informs ideas about these cute, little China dolls growing up to be successful.

Anthropologists have done some interesting work on Internet forums where people talk about, "Where do I find bamboo wallpaper for the nursery?" Or, "Where do I find a panda costume for my child's first Halloween?"

Clearly, there are some cultural assumptions that are being made. But also there's consumerism in it, as well. No matter how people try to deny it, there's

consumerism throughout international adoption.

The way that adoptive parents try to consume culture via their children is also interesting. That also gets at the objectification that you're talking about. One reason why Korean adoption really starts to take off in the 1970s is that Americans are paying more attention to multiculturalism, and their Korean children offer a way for them to access a certain amount of exoticism without having to deal with too much exoticism. These parents can go to culture camp with their child, wear a Korean dress for a day, try some dancing, and try some Korean food. You hear about adoptees who say, "We have this Korean corner in my house. There's a screen and a fan." But the child is not too "other." It's a manageable level of exoticism. There are interesting ways that the idea of consuming culture and consumption—buying stuff—intersects with adoption.

HEVELONE: How has Asian adoption and the growth of international adoption influenced the black-white binary in the United States?

OH: When I first looked at Americans adopting from Korea after World War II, I thought it was a case of racial triangulation. In America, as Du Bois anticipated, the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the black-white color line. I initially thought Korean adoption represented a moment where the color line was not as relevant because it's black, and then Asian, and then white, so I thought it was triangulation that was operating: a hierarchy of white, Asian, then black rather than a black-white binary. But I realized that while it seems like triangulation at first, what's actually happening is that Korean adoption is reinscribing the importance of the color line, because one of the reasons why Korean children, and then Asian children in general, are popular is that they're not black. In the United States, there's what's called a "white baby famine" in the 1970s. The children that are available are black and Native American.

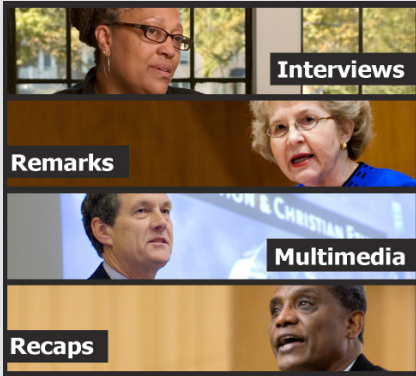
Korean children are more desirable than these other children for multiple reasons, but one of them is that they're not black. That's the really important thing. It's not

that they're Asian. It's not that they're close to white. It's just that they're not black.

This is part of a larger refiguring of the Asian identity that happened after World War II, where Asian American communities—Chinese-Americans, Japanese Americans—manage to reconfigure themselves as good U.S. citizens because they're family-oriented, hardworking, and capitalist. They're able to establish themselves as not-black as well. Asian adoptees and Asian-Americans become more acceptable because, although they are not white, they're not black. That reinscribes the power of the color line.

HEVELONE: Thank you so much. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to us about this.


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