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Publication Date

2023-12-10

Peer reviewed

WORKING PAPER SERIES

The Origins of Korean Adoption: Cold War Geopolitics and Intimate Diplomacy

OCTOBER 2009

WP 09-09

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Note: This paper was prepared exclusively for the U.S.-Korea Institute's Working Paper Series.

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ABSTRACT

The adoption of children from South Korea to the West has been ongoing since the end of the Korean War in 1953. During the past half century, more than 200,000 children have been adopted into predominantly white families in Western Europe, North America, and Australia. This paper examines the origins of Korean adoption in the immediate postwar period, showing how the first adoptions of Korean boys by American servicemen gave way to the adoptions of mixed-race, and then full-Korean children into nuclear families. I elaborate on a little-known history of Korean transnational adoption to understand more fully how particular “technologies of intimacy,” including those related to legislation, transportation, communications, and especially mass media and financial sponsorships, facilitated the transfer of children from Korea to the U.S., and how these technologies were informed by and reproduced paternalistic relations between Americans and Koreans in the context of the Cold War. In addition, I focus on how sentimentalized images of “orphans” symbolically *neutralized* and depoliticized highly political contexts, and also on how the exchange and transfer of actual children in adoption *mediated* geopolitical relations between states. Through these neutralizing and mediating roles, “Korean orphans” linked the U.S. biopolitical order, ideologies of family and childhood, and Cold War geopolitical interests with South Korea’s own biopolitical, nation-building and diplomatic exigencies. Viewing Korean adoption through this lens reveals connections between biopolitical projects and the production of domestic intimacies (Stoler 2001, 2003), and between international migrations of children and political economic processes. It also denaturalizes a dominant narrative that equates transnational adoption with humanitarianism by contextualizing it with respect to Cold War geopolitics and American moral and cultural hegemony in the post-WWII period.

INTRODUCTION

Korea...1954...Thousands of children suffered in crowded, understaffed and poorly supplied orphanages—children, it seemed, that no one wanted. But God gave one couple a heart to love these children. This most ordinary family—a lumberman with a heart condition, a farming wife and six children—changed the world when they adopted eight Korean-Amerasian children. The story of the Harry Holt family testifies to God’s ability to use ordinary people to bring about extraordinary change. Intercountry adoption flourishes today, largely because God used the faith and determination of the Holts to adopt homeless children into families of their own.

Back cover copy, *The Seed from the East*, 1956
[ellipses in original]

This is the story conventionally told about the origins of international adoption from South Korea.¹ It is a narrative of Christian charity and divine selection, but also one of the “extraordinary” capabilities (even if God-given) of “ordinary” individuals. The key characters in this story are a quintessential American frontier figure, thousands of needy children, and a Christian God. Bertha Holt, Harry’s “farming wife,” penned two books, one, *The Seed from the East* (1956) and the other, *Bring My Sons from Afar* (1986),² both of which borrow their titles from verses in the Book of Isaiah. These are the primary texts that compose the legendary story of Harry’s efforts to bring Korean children to families in the West.³

It is undeniable that Harry Holt played an instrumental role in helping intercountry adoption to “flourish,” and, for many in South Korea, the Holt name is virtually synonymous with overseas adoption and child welfare.⁴ Yet, fifty years later, the mythic stature of Holt as represented in Bertha’s books and by Holt International Children’s Services (the agency that Harry Holt established) is being challenged by many who are critical of how international adoption developed into a “quick-fix” for the problems of child welfare in the global South and a solution to childlessness in the North (see Sarri et al. 1998). Some of

the most vocal contemporary critics of intercountry adoption are adult Korean adoptees who, dismayed to know that South Korea continues to send an average of three or four babies abroad every day, consider Holt's humanitarian mission to be an example of another quintessentially American figure—the missionary as cultural imperialist (Bruining 1989; Hubinette 2004; Nopper 2004; Trenka et al. 2006).⁵

These negative views of Holt, while informed by contemporary cultural politics, are not, however, entirely new. Holt was, from the beginning of his child-rescue crusade, a controversial figure in the media and the object of vigorous opposition by professional social workers and child welfare specialists in the U.S. who found his “unorthodox” placement methods to be dangerous for the children he transplanted and for the families that received them.⁶ In addition, although Korean children dominated worldwide international adoption placements well into the early 1990s, this phenomenon can only be properly understood in the context of international adoptions from Europe and Japan that evolved directly out of WWII and American geopolitical ascendance in the early years of the Cold War. The patriotic pro-natalism of 1950s America (May 1988)—which linked American cultural citizenship and national security with parenthood and the nuclear family—combined with a middlebrow internationalist ethos (Klein 2003) that encouraged everyday Americans to imagine themselves as participants in world events, are also important to my analysis of how international adoption came to be a rationalized and institutionalized practice around those first Korean placements. From the initial years of international and transracial adoption, its value as a policy and practice was actively debated by social workers, anthropologists, psychologists and others, many of whom voiced criticisms and concerns that continue to resonate in the debates that are waged over the costs and benefits of adoption today.

In the following historical narrative, I begin with a discussion of how Korean children figured in the American social imaginary, based on images and articles from American print media in the 1950s in which the “Korean waif” as the object of sentimental attachment and rescue for American GIs frequently appeared. These “waifs of war” and military “mascots” were among the first to be adopted, oftentimes by U.S. soldiers or their extended families. Although it was the appearance of mixed-race children as a social welfare problem that spurred the Korean government to pursue international adoption as an emergency measure, the first adoptee-mascots were, by and large, full-Korean boys.⁷

The U.S. press was especially influential in provoking sentimental responses among Americans, many of whom responded to media images of orphans and mixed-race children by contacting the South Korean government to donate money, clothing, and toys to orphanages or to inquire about how to adopt these children into their families. I place this phenomenon within the context of U.S. adoption policy and practice of the time, wherein a rationalized social work institution (Herman 2002; Berebitsky 2000), along with a shortage of available white babies, led to stringent requirements for infertile American couples who wanted to participate in the post-war baby boom. The adoption of “mixed-race” Korean-American children thus became another alternative for so-called childless couples, especially those motivated by Christian values.

The collapse of egocentric motives into altruistic discourses, combined with an American sense of entitlement and cultural superiority, can be clearly gleaned from letters written by hopeful couples in the U.S. to representatives of the Korean government in the 1950s. I examine the documentation of two cases from South Korean state archives that illuminate how Americans articulated their desires for Korean children and how the South Korean state helped to facilitate adoptions in the early years. For it was not simply the desire of Americans that made these adoptions possible, but also the accommodating role of the first South Korean administration. The South Korean government was concerned about establishing legal procedures for the efficient removal of children from Korea, and was perhaps equally invested in fortifying its international reputation. As I show, the South Korean government under President Syngman Rhee capitalized on the sentimental power of Korean orphans to further diplomatic and foreign relations interests, especially with the U.S. Finally, I describe how the establishment of adoption agencies and technological infrastructures made possible, and even necessary, the replacement of dwin-

ding numbers of mixed-race children with full-Korean children in the 1960s. These economic and/or social orphans are the children who constitute the great majority of Korean adoptees today.

This article has two primary objectives. The first is to dislodge the hegemonic myth of Harry Holt by elaborating on a little-known history of Korean transnational adoption (Hübnette 2006). Rather than attributing Korean adoption to the singular determination of an exemplary hero, a historical analysis of adoption before the arrival of Holt reveals how particular “technologies of intimacy,” including those related to legislation, transportation, communications, and especially mass media and financial sponsorships, facilitated the transfer of children from Korea to the U.S., even before South Korea had an international adoption law in place. These technologies reproduced the sentimentalized figure of the Korean “orphan” through the circulation of children’s visual representations and the actual migrations of their physical bodies, created the legal infrastructure for their exchange between nation-states, and thereby generated kinship relations between Korean children and American parents. The second objective is to disrupt the myth of the “orphan,” which continues to structure dominant representations of international adoption as an apolitical humanitarian practice. In the case of Korean adoptions, I focus on how sentimentalized images of “orphans” symbolically *neutralized* and depoliticized highly political contexts, and also on how the exchange and transfer of actual children in adoption *mediated* geopolitical relations between states. Through these neutralizing and mediating roles, “Korean orphans” articulated American biopolitics—the regulation and normalization of the nuclear family and normative childhoods in the context of the Cold War—with South Korea’s own biopolitical, nation-building and diplomatic exigencies. Viewing Korean adoption through this lens reveals connections between biopolitical projects and the production of domestic intimacies (Stoler 2001, 2006) and between international migrations of children with political economic processes. It also denaturalizes a dominant narrative that equates transnational adoption with humanitarianism by contextualizing its emergence with respect to Cold War geopolitics and U.S. empire in the post-WWII period.

KOREAN WAIFS AND THE MASCOT PROBLEM: AMERICAN SOLDIERS FATHER KOREAN CHILDREN

“So let’s face it. Intercountry adoptions are here to stay.”

—Susan T. Pettiss, Assistant Director, International Social Service (1954)

The surrender of Japan in 1945 seemed to promise liberation and a long-awaited opportunity for self-determination for Korea, which had suffered 35 years of brutal colonization under Japan. Following the war, however, the Cold War superpowers quickly negotiated the distribution of Japan’s former colonies, and Korea, given its strategic geopolitical location, was divided into two occupation zones, one half, north of the 38th parallel, under immediate influence by the U.S.S.R, and the southern half, under protection of the U.S. The arbitrary division at the 38th parallel, scrawled hastily on a map in 1945, led to the establishment of two opposing states by 1948, and turned Korea into a political hot zone, setting the stage for the first military conflict of the Cold War, with North Korea supported economically and militarily by the Soviets and China, and South Korea by the UN and the U.S.

The three-year war that ravaged the tiny peninsula resulted in 10 million separated families and left half a million widows and tens of thousands of orphaned or needy children in South Korea alone. An estimated 36,000 American troops died, and as many as 3 million Koreans on both sides were dead by 1953 when the military stalemate restored the boundary at the 38th parallel, and set the two states on a course of Cold War hostilities and competing nationalisms for decades to come.

Without the devastation wrought by the war and the subsequent U.S. military occupation, Korean adoption would probably

not exist today. Indeed, a study on adoption published by the U.S. Children's Bureau in 1955, under the subheading "Inter-country Adoption," makes clear the connection between U.S.'s postwar interventionist policies and its international welfare responsibilities: "As long as it is necessary to maintain approximately a million and a half men in the military overseas what happens to the children of these men becomes a social and a political problem" (Children's Bureau 1955: 38).

Children left homeless or orphaned during the war were constructed in the U.S. media as objects of humanitarian concern and became major beneficiaries of overseas charity following the war. Moreover, their welfare was key to a U.S. postwar Communist containment policy that sought to use humanitarian aid as a means of building "good will" among the Korean people. The thousands of mixed-race children who were born to Korean women and fathered by members of the armed forces quickly became a highly visible social welfare and publicity problem for both the new South Korean government under President Syngman Rhee and for the newly hegemonic U.S., which was concerned about maintaining a reputation as the embodiment of democratic ideals in the "free world."

From the U.S. perspective, these "GI babies" or "UN babies"⁸ presented a possible weapon that North Korea could seize upon in the ideological battle to discredit the U.S. and its Cold War expansionism. Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision International, an evangelical Christian aid organization that first began its global humanitarian projects in Korea, explicitly used the adoption of mixed-race Korean children as part of an anti-Communist, Christian propaganda program. Ironically, however, it was the "solution" of overseas adoption that led eventually to North Korea's scathing criticism of South Korean "traitors" who sold children to American "slave traders...divided among capitalists and plantation owners" (*Washington Post* 1959).⁹

South Korea became the largest development project in the world after the end of the war, and the U.S. was the primary orchestrator of this nation-building project, a principal objective of which was to create a viable anti-Communist state in Asia (Ekbladh 2004: 19). In addition to the \$200 million donated annually by the U.S., as well as costs for maintaining its military bases and troops, American money flooded in from voluntary aid groups, sectarian organizations, and individual donors.¹⁰ Many of the initial fundraising and donation drives were devised by soldiers and chaplains who wrote home to families, churches, and local newspapers asking for food, clothing, or other supplies for orphanages that they had helped to set up. According to a 1954 report by the Christian Children's Fund, Armed Forces Aid to Korea (AFAK) had, by that time, built 50 orphanages as part of an anti-Communist goodwill project, and the Korea Civil Assistance Command (KCAC), staffed by the U.S. Army, took care of 65 percent of the material needs of orphanages (Asbury 1954).

Americans at home joined the effort by engaging in a number of aid "operations" for Korean children that were widely publicized. The most famous was Operation Kiddie Car, the 1950 evacuation of 1,000 children from Seoul to Cheju Island at the beginning of the war. Colonel Dean Hess, a Catholic-priest-turned-fighter-pilot, was credited with saving these children, and he wrote a memoir that was made into the Hollywood feature film *Battle Hymn* in 1956.¹¹ Operation Santa Claus was an Army-initiated Christmas clothing drive for orphanages, and Operation Winter and Operation GI converted American women's yarn work into interventionist relief projects for children. Operation Giftlift brought Christmas presents in 1952 to the children in the Cheju Island orphanage from members of the air force stationed in Japan. The transportation en masse of Korean children out of South Korea also borrowed from the militarized connotations of the word "operation": World Vision's Operation Stork and Harry Holt's Operation Baby brought planeloads of children to the U.S. in late 1956.

In addition, Korean "waifs" and "orphans" often appeared in mass media reports recounting the charitable deeds of American soldiers.¹² One image from an October 1953 *Christian Science Monitor* article, "GIs Clothe South Korean Waifs," shows an American soldier with a small Korean toddler, putting a sweater up to her shoulders (*Christian Science Monitor* 1953). The first paragraph reads:

American soldiers—who once called all Koreans ‘gooks’—now are engaged in a number of projects, which indicate that affection and respect have largely replaced their earlier skepticism. Many GIs who find Korean customs confusing and Korean politics unsavory are putting their efforts into the most promising of many unofficial relief activities: aid for South Korea’s ragged, appealing children. For these soldiers, the tattered waifs with the beguiling faces are the most understandable feature of the Korean scene...

As this article suggests, American soldiers were able to overcome latent or blatant racism and cultural “skepticism” by focusing on humanitarian efforts for “beguiling” children. The “waifs of war” were often represented as “orphans” and Korean relatives were rarely, if ever, mentioned in these press accounts. Rather, the benevolent American soldier stood in as a parental figure, as in this photo, crossing racial and cultural moats of “confusion” by taking on a paternal role to provide for and “clothe” the needy third-world child. This article and personal narratives of U.S. veterans of the Korean War underscore how the generic humanity of the children allowed U.S. soldiers to redeem their own particular humanity in the context of a dehumanizing war, as “Americans” whose acts of charity reinstated their personal and national moral exceptionalism.

Thus, an ambivalent picture emerges around the role of American servicemen in the history of intercountry adoption from South Korea. On the one hand, they fulfilled a paternalistic role as the main supporters of orphanages and conduits for charitable donations from concerned Americans at home. On the other hand, many of them abrogated their actual paternal responsibilities as fathers to children who were subsequently abandoned due to the dual stigmas of illegitimacy and miscegenation. The stigmatization of these children warranted the first wave of intercountry adoptions from South Korea.¹³ This Janus-faced nature of the U.S. military occupation—exploitative and humanitarian—has characterized the neo-colonial relationship between the U.S. and South Korea since the 1950s. As Abelmann and Lie (1995) write, describing the role of the U.S. in South Korea: “Through military and civilian contacts, the United States became at once an object of material longing and materialistic scorn, a heroic savior and a reactionary intruder” (62).

The metonymic association of the U.S. and American men with “heroic saviors” took material form in American newspaper images that portrayed servicemen arriving at airports, returning from their tours of duty in Korea with young Korean boys, or “mascots,” in tow. First appearing in 1952, articles reported how Korean boys and girls were adopted by the GI’s parents and sometimes adopted by the soldier himself. Through perseverance and personal connections, servicemen cut through extensive “red tape” during a period when Korea itself had no international adoption policy or legislation, and when U.S. race-based immigration policies effectively barred all Asians from entry (excepting limited quotas for Chinese, Indians and Filipinos).¹⁴ Many of these early adopters received special clearance through the military and filed private Congressional petitions which may have functioned like “rewards for meritorious service,” or else were considered uncontroversial because they were based on a notion of familial relationship, even if not one of blood (Ota 2001: 229).¹⁵ Married couples in the armed services constituted a major proportion of adoptive parents in the first few years, as their itinerant careers made it difficult for them to conform to standard adoption agency protocols and requirements for domestic adoption (Children’s Bureau 1955: 7-8).¹⁶ There were also the numerous cases of bachelors adopting Korean boys and girls, leading one international social worker to fret:

Frequently we receive requests for assistance in adopting Korean boys (and girls!) from U.S. servicemen who are single. You know the mascot problem well! We usually suggest they discuss with Mrs. Hong how they would help these Korean youngsters to get an education in Korea. We believe these children are often over 10, therefore not eligible under the Refugee Relief Act Section 5. We hope she can refer these servicemen to relief agencies and arrange a method of financial contribution and social planning.¹⁷

A case culled from U.S. newspaper archives reveals the unfortunate and more complicated story of one of these so-called

mascots. Brought over at the age of three, Lee Kyung Soo, renamed Lee Paladino, a plump, dimple-cheeked Korean boy, was featured in newspaper articles that chronicled his first few years in his adoptive country. Adopted by Vincent T. Paladino, a Navy chief boatswain's mate, Lee was found on a "muddy Incheon street," according to the *Los Angeles Times* profile entitled, "Korean Waif Becomes Real American Boy." The initial difficulty in acquiring a U.S. entry visa for Lee made his arrival at the Idlewild airport, his baptism, and his first day of school even more picturesque and newsworthy (*Los Angeles Times* 1953; see *Chicago Daily Tribune* 1953 and *New York Times* 1953, 1954). The final story in the archive is, however, unaccompanied by a photo of the perpetually smiling boy mimicking his proud adoptive father. Rather, it conveys a very different narrative of "becoming American"—Lee was relinquished to the state welfare department when his father married and "friction" developed between Lee and his stepmother. Sent to a foster family, Lee, at the age of nine, ultimately ended up being legally adopted by his adoptive grandparents (*New York Times* 1958).

In the immediate postwar period, fictive adoptions of mascots, especially boys, and the conception of children with Korean women were both ways in which American men "fathered" Korean children, and they index the ambiguous forms of intimacy that emerged out of the neocolonial encounter between South Korea and the U.S. Early adoptions of mascots by single men and the abandonment of Korean women and their mixed-race children are both non-normative expressions of paternalism (men being "maternal" on the one hand, and engaging in illicit sex, on the other) that soon gave way to more normative views of sexuality and the nuclear family, inflected by American Christianity, in which adoption was feminized and children were framed as humanitarian "orphans," rather than as children abandoned by their American fathers.

"A KOREAN WAR ORPHAN FOR YOU": CHRISTIAN AMERICANISM AND U.S. PATERNALISM ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

In the years following WWII, American paternalism on the global stage, characterized by Cold-War era expansionism and worldwide militarization, was matched on the domestic front by maternalism in the form of "adoption," whether fictive, as in child sponsorship, or real, as in the case of intercountry adoptions. As Christina Klein (2003) argues, sponsorship programs, such as that of Christian Children's Fund, came to be seen as part of the fight against the encroachment of Communism in Asia and as a means by which Americans could "identify with the nation as it undertook its world-ordering projects of containing communism and expanding American influence" (159). Historian Arissa Oh explicitly links the success of Harry Holt's religiously inspired mission to what she calls "Christian Americanism"—a "fusion of vaguely Christian principles with values identified as particularly 'American'—specifically, a uniquely American sense of responsibility and the importance of family.... it equated being a good Christian with being a good American" (2005: 175).

Christian Americanism, anti-Communism, and adoption were closely tied in the 1950s, a period that witnessed a proliferation of the word "adoption" in appeals for sponsorship and long-distance fostering of Korean waifs and orphans. Aid organizations made pleas to the American public to "adopt" orphanages, schools, or other institutions as a means to encourage greater numbers of individual donations. In a 1956 World Vision advertisement, the conflation of charity, commerce and family in the word "adoption" is clearly legible. "A Korean Orphan for You.... Yours for the asking."¹⁸ The hucksterish quality of the ad lends it a ring of populism but also suggests that, in pro-family 1950s America, being a "Mother or Daddy" to a Korean orphan was what everyone else was doing. The exchange of personalized letters, information, and money involved in fosterage-from-afar helped to feed American imaginations about these children, and, as Christina Klein argues, "... 'adoption' linked political participation and political obligation to feelings of pleasure, love, and domestic fulfillment" (159). In fact, the effectiveness of using the language of adoption to promote sponsorship became apparent when sponsors began petitioning to make their figurative adoptions real by bringing "their child home."

HOW TO ADOPT KOREAN BABIES

“How to Adopt Korean Babies” was the title of an article that appeared in *Ebony* magazine in September 1955. With images of a dozen Black-Korean mixed babies, the article painted a bleak picture for these children, ostracized and stigmatized in South Korea, where, it was described, “racial purity is a deeply entrenched social fetish”(31). In a climate of hostility towards them and their mothers, these babies were often found abandoned or left at orphanages.

For both political and humanitarian reasons, officials of the U.S. State department hope that these children will find homes in America. Not only would the youngsters benefit enormously by coming to the U.S., but, in the words of a Foreign Service aide in Korea, their adoption “would effectively counteract any drop in America’s prestige in that part of the world.”¹⁹

The *Ebony* article instructs interested individuals to contact the State Department for information about the Refugee Relief Act. The Refugee Relief Act of 1953 (or, Public Law 203, hereafter “RRA”)²⁰ was passed by the U.S. Congress in August of that year and allowed for 4,000 orphans, younger than 10 years old, from any country with oversubscribed quotas, to be adopted in the United States by American citizens. Set to expire on December 31, 1956, the RRA did not confer citizenship but, rather, made provisions for nonquota immigrant visas for “eligible orphans.” It did not specify particular countries for eligibility but, given the restrictive and discriminatory immigration laws of the time, “nonquota” meant that special provision was being given for “Oriental” children.²¹

The passage of this legislation led to a concerted effort by the South Korean government, the International Social Service-American Branch (ISS-AB), and other various individuals and organizations, including Holt, to find a way to get Korean children to the U.S. before the December 1956 deadline.²² Before its expiration, Eisenhower approved an emergency measure to allow an additional 659 orphan visas to prevent “tragic family separations” (*Christian Science Monitor* 1956). Subsequent legislation extended the availability of these nonquota visas and raised the age limit from 10 to 14, until a permanent immigration law for “eligible orphans” was enacted in 1962.

In South Korea, overseas adoption developed out of a humanitarian crisis and in a legal and social policy vacuum. At the time, South Korea lacked a formal domestic adoption law and had nothing even resembling a social welfare system. In fact, the social welfare system in South Korea today is based on the models provided by Western humanitarian organizations after the war and was profoundly influenced by social work consultants from the U.S. who designed programs and trained women in the field (see Choi 1995). In addition, a number of South Korean adoption agency workers received social work training in American universities.

Based on archival materials from South Korean government sources and the International Social Service, this section outlines how adoption from South Korea was largely shaped by two forces: the rationalization of adoption policies and practices in the U.S. around the nuclear family ideal and the desire of the South Korean government to “solve” its “social welfare problems” through intercountry adoption.

The Market at Home

How is it that images of Korean children halfway around the world were able to enliven the parenting desires of so many white Americans? To answer this question, one needs to take into account how ideologies of family and nation intersected with dominant adoption practices of the day. In a postwar cultural climate wherein patriotism and pro-natalism were conflated, domestic adoption petitions increased twofold between 1945 and 1955, compared to the previous decade.²³ Reflecting a demand for (white) children among white middle-class Americans who longed to participate in the postwar baby boom,

this sudden reversal in the balance between supply and demand led to important shifts in child welfare policy and social work practice. Some agencies reported that prospective parents outnumbered available children by as many as 10 to 1, and in 1955, *The Washington Post* found that children were being bought and sold for up to \$2,000 on the black market (Edstrom 1955: 29).

Because couples were “clamoring for children to adopt” (Gallagher 1958), the social work profession in the U.S. was finding itself under attack, not only for being the gatekeepers to a couple’s potential happiness and fulfillment as parents, but for screening procedures that many couples felt were discriminatory and unnecessarily prying.²⁴ In addition, “independent adoptions” were proliferating as a result of a diminished view of the adoption profession in the public eye. Under these pressures from a powerful segment of the population—white, middle-class heterosexual couples—social workers gathered forces to discuss how to re-legitimize their profession and alter public opinion while safeguarding the rights of the child—a social responsibility, they argued, that they were uniquely qualified to bear, given their specialized experience in casework. Their “knowledge base” was grounded in the experience of “matching” children and families, and their authority rested on the conviction that they, unlike doctors or lawyers involved in “independent” adoptions, were uniquely trained in the theories and practices necessary for ensuring good child placement and “scientifically perfect” families (Berebitsky 2000: 154).

“Matching” had been a central preoccupation since the advent of the adoption profession in the 19th century, when both children and parents were analyzed according to criteria of class, race, religion, intelligence, and personality. Religion was often used as a basis for matching and was also required by law in some states, presenting setbacks for couples in mixed-religious marriages and also for Jewish parents (see Herman 2002). In accordance with the dominant ideology that bound adoption to secrecy, “matching” was crucial to ensure that the child would “fit” into the family, without any seams of illegitimacy that could expose the child to the shame of fictive kinship.

Children had been the ones subject to “scientific” scrutiny in the 1920s and 1930s, probed for their intelligence and suitability for parents who had the luxury to indulge in eugenic demands in a wide-open baby market. By 1945, however, the tables had turned, as the number of desiring parents far exceeded that of available babies. In addition, in the affluent years of post-war America, notions of child development based on environment rather than genetics coincided with an increasingly child-centered family culture, where the possibilities offered by full-time mothering and proper nurture trumped fears of inherited traits (see Herman 2001). In this new era of child welfare, no child would be deemed “unadoptable” from the outset. Rather, as social workers argued, it was a matter of finding the right family for each child, rather than finding the right child for any family. This relatively child-centered ideology put social workers in a new role—that of determining the “fitness” of families.

Therefore, by the 1950s, prospective parents were being screened for their abilities to parent a child, economically, emotionally, and psychologically. According to a report by the Child Welfare League of America, “The adoptive parents must have good health, a stable marriage, exhibit a degree of maturity, and must have evidenced some ability to adjust to the reality of their childlessness. They must be able to see the child as a human being with his [sic] own personality, who needs love and affection and a sense of ‘belonging’” (Gallagher 1958: 10). Agency workers closely monitored adoption placements, which were considered to be provisional until a six-month to one-year period of observation had elapsed. The social worker was key to ensuring that the placement was suitable and that the relationships between parents and children were adequately “cemented.” During this provisional supervisory period, the social agency stood in as the legal guardian and protector of the child whose adoption would not be finalized without proper observation and full agency approval. Another important role the agency played was safeguarding the identity of the birth mother, who was guaranteed confidentiality so she could leave the stigma of an illegitimate birth behind her and return to a life of middle-class respectability.²⁵

As might be expected, the family model the social work system privileged and rewarded was white, middle-class, and heterosexual.²⁶ And, in addition, promoting this model was framed as a social responsibility. “Upon adoption, in the 1940s and

1950s, fell the burden of affirming the composition of the family: homogeneous in looks, tastes, and temperament. The goal of fitting a child into her family was a stated aspect of policy; unstated was the equally important goal of fitting the family into the social order” (Modell and Dambacher 1997: 18-19). Beyond looks, tastes, and temperament, the screening process privileged ethnic, racial, religious, and intellectual similarity. Couples who demonstrated adherence to conventional gender roles were looked upon approvingly, while working mothers were frowned upon. This quest for “best” families, as argued by Gill (2002), was tacitly guided by a notion that collapsed “normality” with “normativity,” unreflectively pursuing an ideal type based on the biologically-related family. Thus, “experience” of social workers was cited as invaluable for ensuring the adoptions would be successful. Yet, the legitimizing discourses that the profession produced were at odds with an increasingly dissatisfied consumer base that would seemingly go to any lengths, legal or not, to satisfy its desire for children, wherever they might be found. For couples who were childless or who wanted to have more children but were too old, or lacked the stability, money, status, lifestyle or education that social workers seemed to demand of prospective adoptive parents, the images of needy orphans halfway around the world must have seemed like a godsend.²⁷

Enter Korean Adoption

The first reported civilian adoption of a Korean “war baby” by an American was finalized in December 1953. The article that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, “First Korean War Baby Brought Here by Nurse” described how the baby, abandoned at birth, “joined the hundreds of other war babies born into similar circumstances—unaccepted by Koreans and unwanted by their American fathers” (*Los Angeles Times* 1953). The nurse who adopted her had been the director of nurses at the Seoul Sanitarium and Clinic, a hospital run by Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) missionaries. She stated that there were fifty Amerasian children in that hospital alone. The “First Korean War Baby” story led to more than 600 requests by letter and telegram to the SDA hospital for information about how to adopt Korean War orphans (P. Kim et al. 2003: 116).

These letters were passed on from George and Grace Rue, SDA missionaries and the directors of the hospital, to Francesca Rhee, Austrian wife of President Syngman Rhee, in early 1954 and, that same year, from First Lady Rhee to Mrs. Oak Soon Hong, a foreign-trained nurse who had been in charge of the Nursing Bureau under the U.S. military government before the war. As Mrs. Hong told me, Francesca Rhee sent a big sedan to pick her up, handed her the stack of letters, asked her to read them and implored her to figure out a way to handle the situation. The Korean government could not offer any financial support, so Mrs. Hong went to each of the foreign aid organizations, asking for money to help set up an adoption agency.

Child Placement Service (CPS; *han'guk adong yangboboe*), nominally supported by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, thus became the first South Korean government-approved adoption agency in January 1954, and was set up to deal exclusively with overseas adoption. It received administrative support from various foreign voluntary associations and start-up money from the American-Korean Foundation (AKF), a non-sectarian organization set up in 1952 that was a main source of foreign aid to Korea well into the 1970s. CPS worked with the sub-committee “Adoptions of Orphans under Public Law no. 203,” formed under the Korean American Voluntary Associations’ (KAVA) Child Welfare Committee in August 1954. ISS, a Geneva-based organization, had been a major contributor to the refugee relocation programs after WWII and had helped to arrange adoptions of children from war-torn European countries to the U.S. Because of this prior experience, ISS-American Branch (ISS-AB) was approached by KAVA and CPS with requests to act as the main liaison for CPS as it tried to set up proper channels for the transfer of children from Korea to the U.S.²⁸

Even before the 1953 cease-fire and the establishment of CPS, “mixed-blood” children (*bonhyōla*) were being constructed as a category of concern and scientific knowledge production by the South Korean government. In 1952, for instance, it was reported in the *Dong-A Daily* that the Ministry of Social Affairs was compiling a census of mixed-race children with the intention to arrange for their “separate accommodations” (*ttaro suyong*) (*Dong A Ilbo* 1952). And in 1953, police bureaus across the

country were instructed to examine the situation of “mixed-blood” children by categorizing them according to “color”: white, black and yellow (*hŭk paek hwanng sam saek ūro pullyu hayŏ chosa*) (*Dong A Ilbo* 1953).

Furthermore, as soon as the U.S. Congress passed the RRA in 1953, Phyllis Woodley, secretary to President Rhee, attempted to establish channels with an organization in the U.S. to facilitate adoptions. Her letter in November to Dr. Howard Rusk of AKF stated, “We desperately need help from some source—an authority who will be recognized by American authorities here—to receive these requests and deal with them expeditiously on the spot. We need to meet this quota as far as we can, for it is clear there are enough American couples who want to adopt these children.”²⁹ Meanwhile, in response to a hesitant query from South Korean Ambassador to the UN Ben C. Limb (Im Byung Jik), President Rhee wrote, “We are most anxious to send as many of our orphans to the States as possible. In particular we desire to have adopted those children of Western fathers and Korean mothers who can never hope to make a place for themselves in Korean society. Those children should appeal to Americans even more than Koreans.”³⁰

The President thus had significant interest in promoting Korean adoption abroad and his office exerted considerable effort to locate specific children requested by American couples. According to CPS’s successor organization, Social Welfare Society, President Rhee’s ideology of “one nation, one race” (*ilguk, ilminju*) and a particular form of postcolonial Korean ethnonationalism (*tanil minjok chŏngsin*) made the situation of mixed-race children an urgent concern for the government (Social Welfare Society 2004: 39).

TECHNOLOGIES OF INTIMACY: TRANSFORMING THIRD WORLD ORPHANS INTO FIRST WORLD CHILDREN

Well before the Los Angeles Times article in December 1953, the Korean consulates in Los Angeles and San Francisco had been receiving letters from all over the country inquiring about the procedures for adopting a Korean child. In fact, throughout the 1950s and 60s, TV and print media appearances of American adoptive families with recently arrived Korean children would spur new waves of public interest, as evidenced by letters sent to the consular offices and ISS. Also, Americans sent monthly monetary donations of \$10 to sponsor children in orphanages, which were deposited into the government’s “Orphan Aid Fund.” Like other groups involved in sponsorship programs organized by religious charities, the Korean government would arrange for specific children to be the beneficiaries of individual sponsors, and then send photos and information about the child to the sponsor. Sometimes these arrangements also led to adoption petitions.

An article in the monthly women’s magazine *McCall’s* in October 1953 featured an American knitting drive, “Operation Winter,” organized by members of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs and the American Legion Auxiliary Group for the children in the Cheju Island orphanage. Several inquiries to the Consul General about Korean War orphans mentioned this article as inspiring a desire to adopt Korean children. Entitled “Warmth for the Orphans of Korea,” the article led one couple to wonder, “...if we couldn’t give love and a home—our love and our home” to one of those Korean orphans.³¹ The letters received by the Consul General in late 1953 were from Connecticut, Iowa, California, Michigan, and Texas, and expressed a range of different motivations and requests in terms of gender and age, with woman writing, “My husband and I would like very much to place a Korean War Orphan in our family and in doing so, eliminate a small part of the world’s suffering.” Many of these families had “natural” children, and couples sought to add children of a certain age to “round out” their families, or give “playmates” to their children. Typical requests included, “We want a girl about 6 or 7 years old. Can you help us find her?” or, “My little girls have always wanted a little brother so I would prefer a little boy, but either would be alright.”³²

Love at First Sight

One case from the presidential archive of Syngman Rhee illustrates how eagerly the Korean government tried to accommodate requests of American parents, many of whom wrote to the Consul General in California or addressed their letters straight to the president. Known for being a staunch anti-Communist, Rhee was a recognizable figure in the U.S. media as a Christian who had been educated in the United States and who had a European wife. Many addressed their correspondence either to the President or the First Lady, or to both, and often identified themselves as fellow Christians, sometimes aligning themselves with South Korea or the Rhees in the fight against the Communist threat.

On October 23, 1953, Mrs. Casey from Forsyth, Missouri, sent a handwritten letter to the South Korean consulate in San Francisco, enclosing a clipping of the above-mentioned *McCall's* article. Like many of the other requests for orphans, Mrs. Casey hoped that she and her husband, childless after nineteen years, could have a child adopted into their home in the Ozarks in time for Christmas. And, like others who were inspired by media reports of needy Korean children, Mrs. Casey and her husband wanted to adopt the child they saw in the photo—a little girl whose face they circled, noting, “the child in circle is one we are writing about.”

“We are poor people so couldn’t give luxury as the rich of this country have, but we have a small farm, and could give a child food, clothing and an education. From what I have read and heard, perhaps we would be able to do much more for her, than could be done in your country under present existing conditions, which I surely hope will improve rapidly as possible.” Mrs. Casey includes a postscript: “Surely by looking at this picture the people in charge of these children will be able to identify this child. If she is still in the home she is the baby we would like to have.”³³

Her letter was forwarded to the Office of the President, which got in touch with the Cheju Island orphanage to locate the little girl. Within a month, information about the child, Sul Ja Kim, had been sent to the consul general’s office, with a letter to the Caseys: “Sul Ja KIM was born on 7 August, 1950. Her parents are unknown but are presumed to have been killed during the first part of the Korean War. She entered the orphanage on 1 December, 1950. The child is of gentle and social nature and has normal and balanced growth. She had measles on October, 1953, but is in good health.”³⁴ A photo of Sul Ja and a list of required documents necessary to process her adoption were included along with the letter. In these early days of adoption, aside from the paperwork necessary to certify the child as an orphan and to acquire a passport and visa, the biggest obstacle was arranging transportation. Interested parents who knew army personnel returning from Korea could arrange for them to escort the child, but it was otherwise difficult to find someone to take care of an unaccompanied child and expensive to pay for the airfare.

The correspondence between the Caseys and the Presidential office continued for one year as Mrs. Casey tried to find a way to bring Sul Ja home. The Caseys, who owned a 150-acre farm, had no liquid assets to pay for transportation or other fees. Mrs. Casey explained, “We could take a child and divide what we have with it, give it anything it would need, but we have no large amount of cash. I hope there is some way you can help us get the baby over here. Surely there will be some way when she needs us so much and we want her so very much.”³⁵ Through persistence and luck, Mrs. Casey was granted a special favor by an American army general stationed in Korea, and by February 1954, the Caseys were assured that Sul Ja would be delivered to them. Yet in October 1954, the Caseys were informed by telegram that Sul Ja’s father had appeared at the orphanage to retrieve her.

Despite the information provided in the orphanage documents, not only did Sul Ja have a living parent, she also, apparently, had a twelve-year-old biological sister who was staying at the same orphanage. Devastated, Mrs. Casey questioned the legality of annulling the adoption, as she and her husband had “amounts of documentary evidence that she had been released last

March. We even have a receipt for her passport. Do you not believe that a release signed in the beginning of such processing as we have had to undergo should in all fairness still be in effect when the child is ready to come to us?"³⁶ She then questioned the paternity claim of the Korean father, who, she found it hard to believe, took four years to find his daughter, and perhaps did not have her best interests in mind: "I can't help feeling Sul Ja's father would be unselfish enough to sign Sul Ja's release so that she might enjoy the benefits of life in America. She would have both a mother and a father also, and we do love her very dearly, in fact we do not see how we can give her up."³⁷ And, in a follow-up letter, she asked, "How will the persons who deprived her of a home here in America feel when they fully realize what they have done?"³⁸

The president's secretary conveyed condolences to Mrs. Casey, saying, "Sul Ja's father has proved his paternity and will not release the child. We have been unable to persuade him to let her go to you." He goes on to suggest that they try to adopt another child, recommending a "UN baby": "These children will, we believe, more easily fit into the American way of life as they are usually intelligent and quite attractive and would probably be more easily accepted into the society of your community. It is these children and not the Koreans who will find it difficult to make a happy life for themselves in our country. We will of course, if you so desire it, locate a suitable Korean girl for you."³⁹ The Caseys were eventually offered a girl, of similar age to Sul Ja, but mixed-race, but this case was handled by CPS and no further documentation was found in the Presidential archive.⁴⁰

Becoming a Daughter

Another contested case suggests some of the broader cultural and structural assumptions at play in the transnational exchange of children. The Manleys, a married couple from Pacoima, California, who had adopted one Korean girl after sponsoring her through a local school, wrote to President Rhee asking for a "great big favor."⁴¹ A friend who had been enlisted in South Korea had "found another little girl"—called in this letter, "Miss Chang, Chong Ja"—before leaving Seoul in January 1959 and arranged for her adoption through Holt Adoption Agency. The child, however, did not want to be adopted or removed from her foster family. Due to this unforeseen circumstance, Mrs. Manley wrote to the President, appealing to him as a Christian: "Please. Please. But God's will be done. Please know we only want this child to love to give a chance to go school to dance, learn music to raise as our own beloved daughter along with our own Mary Oh, who just arrived, one month ago today."

The office manager at Holt attested that they had met with the child and her guardian and decided that the case was closed, as the guardian was unwilling to release the child. Although the foster parents had made an agreement with the army officer who had acted as a proxy for the Manleys, the child herself was unwilling to leave her foster parents, to whom she had grown attached. The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs investigated the family and determined that, contrary to what the Manleys suspected, the child was not being coerced or controlled by the foster parents, nor being exploited as a servant. The Ministry wrote to Mrs. Manley explaining, "constant efforts have been made to persuade Miss Chang, Chong Ja to change her mind by the foster family, village neighbours, and school teachers but in vain, as she stubbornly resists to give in." In July 1959, the Manleys were informed that there was nothing further to be done.

In response, Mrs. Manley took off the kid gloves and put aside Christian fellowship to make a claim based on "fair play": "Perhaps he [their enlisted friend] feels as I do someone who paid more may have got her. Now I loved Korea the things I read about your President Rhee. I get the papers from Seoul every week, I and my Church have sent many things money yet.... Now we are going to sponsor another orphan.... I feel if they signed a release she should come.... Our country [sic] are friends but I want to know where Korea stands on fair play. And I have lots of friends and some may I say influence."

The Health Minister responded, "I thank you for the humanitarianism expressed in your letter.... Although we previously

made a decision to close the processing of Miss Chang Chong Ja's adoption on the grounds that the child refused to be adopted by anyone other than her present foster parents, we brought her to Seoul to further consider the matter. We continued our efforts to persuade her to become your daughter through a series of tests and counsellings [sic] by a team of case workers, consisting of a social worker, a psychologist, and a psychiatrist of the Social Child Guidance Clinic, which is one of the best child counseling centers available in Korea. The result is that she has changed her mind and wants to go to you as your daughter. It seems that until she talked to professional social workers in an absolutely free atmosphere she did not realize how fortunate she would be to be adopted into a happy home like yours."

The "fortunate" future of Chang Chong Ja was predicated on the poverty and chaos of Korea in the postwar period, which fueled prevalent desires among many Koreans to pursue the "American dream." In Korea of the 1950s and 1960s, citizens' duties to the country were emphasized by the state in concert with ideologies of nationalism and anti-Communism. A 1955 letter from a government official in Korea to a South Korean diplomat in England questioned the "cliché or fad with us that emigration is a good thing without any question." He asserted the importance for "right-minded and able-bodied Koreans to remain home and contribute to the rebuilding of the nation in every way possible.... All patriotic people should stay home at least until this national crisis is over."⁴²

Yet contradictory desires and resentments coexisted with a sense of duty to the new nation and its rebuilding. Scraping by under conditions of extreme poverty and social dislocation, many South Koreans sought opportunities to go abroad, especially to the U.S. In 1966, Korean American novelist Richard E. Kim, upon returning to South Korea, recounted the resentful reaction he received from those who were not so lucky as he was:

I know lots of students who went to America. Like you. And they don't come back. I am not mad at you. I am not mad at them either. I don't blame them. If I could get away, hell, I wouldn't come back either. But I know I can't.... Just stand outside the Bando hotel at noon and watch the lucky ones boarding the buses to the airport to fly out of the country, and watch those who are sending them off, sick with envy. Every kid I know wants to get out. (cited in Abelmann and Lie 1995: 60)

Emigration to the U.S. was "two-tiered," consisting of privileged exchange students and under-class military brides (Abelmann and Lie 1995: 60). Orphans, however, were given first priority for receiving visas from the U.S. diplomatic office ahead of both of these groups (*Dong A Ilbo* 1955). In this context, Chong Ja's refusal to be sent to America was most likely considered to be a foolish squandering of an invaluable opportunity, one which many other Koreans would have eagerly pursued.

These cases highlight the biopolitical and geopolitical logics of South Korea's adoption policy in the postwar period. Adoption served as a way for the state to regulate its mixed-blood population and to simultaneously maintain good will with American citizens. It was also a "politics of life" (Fassin 2007) in the sense that it gave "specific value and meaning to human life" (500) and implicitly involved the "selection of which existences it was possible or legitimate to save" (501). The Korean government undertook research to locate and assess the actual number of mixed-blood children, as well as of women living with or in relations with UN or American soldiers. Adoption became a way of purifying the population, through the regulation of mixed-race children as well as the illicit sexuality of their Korean mothers, and social workers became the main actors in executing this project of family planning and population control. Mrs. Oak Soon Hong and other young female social workers traveled to the DMZ to locate children and convince mothers that it was better for everyone if they were to send the children to be adopted by Americans who wanted them. Mixed-race adoptees of the war generation with whom I have spoken can still recall encounters between Korean social workers and their Korean mothers who were convinced to send their children for adoption (see also Han 2004).

According to one 50-year-old Korean American adoptee, Korean mothers “were told all sorts of things.” His mother, who was a singer, was told that her son would be adopted into a musician’s family, “and therefore...she’d give me up...[for] a future as, living a life she would want for me.” It is not unimaginable to assume that similar arguments may have been presented to the child Chang Chong Ja about her own best interests and the opportunity for education and material comforts in the U.S. that she would be missing by refusing the offer of love and the chance to be a daughter to the American family who wanted her.

The cases of Sul Ja Kim and Chang Chong Ja present disruptive moments that bring to light cultural assumptions and social structural relations. In both, assumptions about opportunity, entitlement, and familial ownership were rhetorically mobilized by desiring Americans in their attempts to adopt the children they had decided were “theirs.” Mrs. Casey’s and Mrs. Manley’s desires to adopt were initially framed as humanitarian gestures of aid, altruism, and political solidarity with “Korea,” but under threat of the adoptions’ dissolutions, both women resorted to the language of litigation, a typically American response to perceived wrongs. Moreover, both women drew upon universalizing ideologies of children’s best interests and American exceptionalism. These cases additionally suggest the lengths to which the Korean government was willing to go in terms of effort and resources to fulfill the requests of these desiring parents.

These contested cases also bring to the surface the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate kinship and how parental claims could be mobilized (“she would have a mother and a father also”; “she has agreed to be your daughter”) or delegitimized (“you...must know how impossible it seems to us to think that it could have taken a natural father four years to search every orphanage in Korea”; “someone who paid more may have got her”) by individuals and the state. The strikingly hybrid nature of these negotiations—personalized attention from the Korean government to help individual Americans produce nuclear families, crossing traditional boundaries of public and private, and, moreover, national borders—suggests the peculiarities of transnational adoption as a reproductive technology.

In the case of Sul Ja Kim, despite the fact that her adoption had been all but “promised” by the President of Korea himself, the appearance of the Korean father (one wonders what might have happened if the mother had shown up), trumped all other claims to the child. In the case of Chang Chong Ja, her relationship to her foster family was not, apparently, legally binding and could therefore be contested (as a utilitarian or exploitative relationship of slavery, rather than of familial love, or as temporary rather than permanent) and thereby undone through threats of legal action, adult persuasion, and expert opinion. In both cases, it becomes clear how arbitrarily the lives of these girls were decided by the contingencies of war, international relations, government intervention, the American media, and notions of “a happy home.”

Lisa Cartwright describes how the “global social orphan” was constructed in American media accounts of Romania’s crisis in child welfare in the early 1990s. The collapse of physical, cultural, and personal distance between spectator and sufferer made possible by the circulation of images in the media provoked American couples to travel to Romania, “thereby playing out the collective fantasy of direct transnational crisis intervention and becoming parents as an act of humanitarian aid” (2005: 195). She continues: “News and its compelling visual evidence had become vehicles for intimate encounters and for private, even familial, transformations involving bodies and intimacy...” (195).

As the Casey example suggests, the American media in the 1950s likewise functioned as a technology of intimacy, producing fantasies of rescue and inspiring Americans to action through an imagined collapse of distance between themselves and the children represented in photographs and on film. Indeed, World Vision’s founder Bob Pierce actively mobilized visual technology. He was “a pioneer of Christian documentary film, combining evangelical concern, humanitarian political and social activism, and motion pictures” (Hamilton 1980), and one of his early films was the original inspiration for Harry Holt to rescue children from Korea.⁴³ Through images in magazines like *McCall’s* and documentary films, such as those produced by

Pierce, what Cartwright calls the “global politics of pity” brought a sense of moral urgency to saving children across the world by bringing them directly into the privatized world of the home. Moreover, the motivations of parents were buttressed by new legal frameworks and promises granted at the presidential level.

Transnational adoption is a phenomenon that may be precipitated by a social crisis of the welfare state and actualized through the “extraordinary” abilities of ordinary people, but, as these examples illustrate, its full elaboration as a system depended upon the coordination of a range of technologies: national family and immigration legislation; expert knowledge and universal notions of children’s best interests; missionary, development and humanitarian charitable projects; the circulation of images and the production of transnational imaginaries and affects; and the availability of international communication and transportation technologies. In the case of Korea, although Holt arrived early on to “save” UN and GI babies, his rescue mission’s success was predicated on these “technologies of intimacy” as well as the convergence of South Korean geopolitical interests and biopolitical concerns.

INTIMATE DIPLOMACY: EXCHANGING AID FOR SOCIAL WELFARE AND NATION-BUILDING

“...it is hoped...that the time will come when racially-mixed children will be accepted in Korean society and forced emigration, under the guise of inter-country adoption, will no longer be the only alternative to poverty, deprivation and disgrace.” (ISS, Activity Report 1966)⁴⁴

The mixed-race children of war were not only considered by the South Korean government to be a major liability in its nation-building project and Cold War campaign for sovereign legitimacy. They were also recognized as vehicles for accruing economic benefits through American largesse. In contrast to the language of benevolence used to characterize (white) American interest in Korean children, a South Korean official described in a letter to the Korean diplomat in England how UN soldiers from Ethiopia who had fought in Korea had been “pestering for adopting a number of war orphans.” He goes on to explain: “We have so far resisted their importunity on the ground, though not so explicitly said, that we have no diplomatic mission in Ethiopia and that the Government, being these poor orphans’ natural guardian, would be irresponsible if it gave them without being sure of protecting them.”⁴⁵ Although probably consistent with government policy, the statement belies what was a more significant concern, namely, the ways in which “these poor orphans” could act as channels for foreign aid from wealthy nations. Ambassador Im Byung Jik made this explicit in a letter to President Rhee summarizing a UN conference on Maintenance of Obligations, in which the financial redress for women and children abandoned by foreign occupation troops was discussed. He wrote, “While these meetings go on, and while we should be alert on [sic] what can be done through this for the benefit of our girls and their children, we shall also keep in mind the larger aspects of national interest such as intercountry adoption and military aid we continue to receive and keep our diplomatic relations in proper attitude.” The ambiguous role of women and children in South Korea’s nation-building project—devalued and dehumanized at home, but revalued as objects of desire by foreigners from abroad—precisely demarcates the ways in which South Korean biopolitics dovetailed with its geopolitics. The regulation and normalization of the population was effectuated through a convergence with international relations. Adoption thereby became a form of transnational biopolitics and intimate diplomacy, in which domestic population problems were converted into what policy rhetoric later explicitly referred to as “civil diplomacy” (*min’gan oegyŏ*).⁴⁶

Although mixed-race children were the initial objects of concern, by the late 1950s, the population of abandoned mixed-race children in institutions was rapidly declining as the rate of child abandonment among the general Korean population soared.

The shift in Korean adoption from mixed-race war orphans to full-Korean social and economic orphans, although beyond the scope of this article, is crucial to understanding how Korean children became enrolled in an aggressive modernization policy that leveraged poor Korean families and the lives of their children for national security and foreign policy goals. The interest and demand for Korean war orphans exploded in the U.S., especially after Holt's widely-publicized adoption of eight children in 1955, and competition among the existing agencies in Korea heated up by the beginning of the 1960s. A dwindling supply of adoptable mixed-race children had by then led to practices such as baby-hunting and financial remuneration to Korean mothers who were counseled by adoption agency workers to relinquish their mixed-race children.⁴⁷ These measures were justified by the widespread belief that Korea's monoracial culture held no future for these children, especially as they reached school age.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, a growing number of their mothers were choosing to keep them, as the possibility of reuniting with the child's father was no longer simply a vain hope: marriage petitions filed by American men stationed in Korea multiplied up to 80 per month in the late 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, the existence of mixed-race children had become normalized in "camptowns" (*keijich'on*)—areas surrounding American military bases where prostitution was prevalent—and some optimistic observers at the time noted signs of greater acceptance by local communities and the public at large. By 1962, there were no mixed-race children living in baby homes or orphanages, yet demand for these children continued to be high among Americans who either had no other options for having children or were determined to save a Korean child, or both. Under the Park Chung Hee administration (1961-1979), social workers and the Korean government grappled with the reality that international adoptions could only provide a temporary solution to the problem of child abandonment, and a range of programs was implemented to encourage family preservation, to tackle the root causes of child abandonment, to integrate mixed-race children into mainstream public schools, and to promote foster care and domestic adoptions.

With increasing numbers of children abandoned and institution populations exceeding capacity, one of the initiatives implemented by the government was the "Home Returnee" program. It was estimated that more than 70 percent of children in orphanages had living parents, and under this program, they were to be sent back home. It was then discovered, however, that many of these children were actually "ghost children," who not only had parents, but also were not even in residence in the orphanages. Many were sent to orphanages for schooling or daycare and others existed solely on paper to pad the roles of the institutions. Despite these and other measures, a peak of 11,000 cases of abandonment was reached in 1964 (in comparison to 755 in 1955), and by 1968, there were 70,000 children in 600 institutions, with most considered to be unadoptable due to older age, poor health/disability or unattractiveness. By 1965, 70 percent of children being sent overseas were of full Korean parentage and, from 1967, the number of countries they were sent to was expanding to include the Scandinavian nations, Holland, Australia, and Canada. Thus, even as the supply of mixed-race children dwindled and the urgency of their welfare abated, the number of children sent overseas was rapidly increasing.

Holt Adoption Agency, with its vertically-integrated system of orphanages, baby homes, medical services, and adoption administration, was able to move children quickly to new adoptive homes, and was less concerned about the need for developing indigenous solutions to Korea's welfare needs at the time than was ISS and KAVA. Holt was, in fact, identified by Korean and American social workers as a "contributory factor to the increase in adoption; it brings in substantial money to Korea, it sets a precedent of how Korea can transfer its welfare responsibilities to other countries."⁴⁹ This transfer of welfare responsibilities took place in a context of Korea's Cold-War-era fixation with national security. With 2 percent of the national budget spent on social welfare, and more than 40 percent on national defense, welfare institutions were entirely dependent upon sponsorships, and directors of orphanages and baby hospitals held on to as many sponsored children as possible in order to ensure the continuous flow of money from foreign organizations. This situation became exacerbated as sponsorships began flagging in the late 1960s and early 1970s. CPS, which functioned as ISS's partner organization, was caught be-

tween American social work standards for placement and the competitive situation on the ground. Locating mixed-race children in need of adoption and securing their adoptability meant taking on guardianship and supporting them in foster care until they could be matched to an appropriate American family. With insufficient funds for foster care offered by overseas sponsors and government subsidies, the only solution for CPS was to expand its intercountry adoption placements. Thus, two contradictory tendencies emerged—a desire to contract the number of overseas placements in order to prevent further dependency on intercountry adoption, and a need to expand the program to European countries—where laxer standards meant faster placements than the U.S.—simply to make ends meet.

ISS eventually left South Korea because it viewed its role in intercountry adoption as compromising its commitment to universal standards of child welfare. Children in South Korea were being abandoned for reasons of poverty and a lack of social welfare services, a situation that ISS considered to be counterproductive to the goal of creating indigenous solutions for children in need. Instead of “finding families for children,” agencies like Holt were finding children for families, which exacerbated the climate of competition. Moreover, the displacement of social welfare funding onto adoption agencies that could bring in foreign exchange made the continued presence of ISS in Korea cause for serious concern. As a 1966 observer from Korea stated, “In Korea today where there is strong need for foreign exchange, I am inclined to think that agencies are assessed by the Ministry in terms of dollars they bring into Korea. The quality of service or service rendered is only secondary.”⁵⁰

By the 1970s, the transfer of financial responsibility from government to agencies was formalized through the 1975 adoption law. A quota system was installed in which a ratio of international to domestic placements had to be met by each agency. Although it seemed to be an attempt to encourage domestic placements and to reduce overseas adoptions, in actuality, because of the cultural resistance to western-style adoptions in Korea, adoption agencies were unable to fulfill the domestic adoption quota.⁵¹ In lieu of domestic placements, the government required agencies to provide social services for children and families. Patricia Nye, ISS’s East Asian Branch supervisor wrote in a 1976 report, “in this sense, the Korean government is transferring the cost of social service to adoption agencies with overseas income, or to the adoptive parents.”⁵²

CONCLUSION

Liisa Malkki argues that children function as a “tranquilizing convention” in the international community, serving to depoliticize highly political contexts (cited in Bornstein 2001). In the case of humanitarian interventions in particular, children are, she writes elsewhere, “sentimentally valued as beings who are nakedly and purely human,” and thus transcend “national and other categorical identities and differences” (1994: 54). Children have been sentimentalized in American culture since the late 19th century (Zelizer 1994), and needy children in particular have been romanticized and construed as icons of humanistic identification, sentimental desire, interventionist rescue (cf. Briggs 2003), as well as Christian internationalism. These sentimentalizing tendencies become magnified in contexts of devastation and disaster—most recently demonstrated by Westerners clamoring to adopt children from countries overwhelmed by the Southeast Asian tsunami in January 2005.

In this historical account of the early period of Korean adoption I have suggested the significant ways in which sentimentalized constructions of children neutralized highly charged political contexts, but also how the movements of actual children mediated intimate relations between states and their different biopolitical projects during the Cold War. In fact, these two processes are fundamentally linked in Korean adoption—the sentimentalization and depoliticization of children as “pure humanity” also made them available to be dispatched as “sons” and “daughters” who could link people and nations as “ambassadors” and “bridges.” This transnational connection between biopolitics and geopolitics illuminates the ways in which the South Korean and U.S. states leveraged differential values of human life across enormous scales—from individual

bodies to international political relations. As I have attempted to show, the articulations of biopolitical and geopolitical projects depended upon a coordinated set of technologies that mobilized American paternalism, Christian Americanism and a “global politics of pity” that, in turn, made it possible for children to be objectified as “orphans,” identified as adoptable, and transferred to new families.

Reexamining the Holt myth to situate Korean adoption historically and politically has been one goal of this article, but another has been to demystify another persistent myth—that of the “orphan” in transnational adoption. The “waifs” and “mascots” adopted by returning servicemen after the war gave way to the mixed-race and full-Korean “orphans” who were adopted by Americans in increasing numbers starting in the late 1950s. The great majority of these children were not actually orphaned, but had living parents, who either relinquished or abandoned them. The “orphan” label, despite its inaccuracy, however, framed these children as desperate for material aid and rescue. It also effectively disconnected them from prior historical and social contexts, thereby freeing them to be “saved” through incorporation into new “families,” which was the primary means by which they also became citizens of new nations.

Despite the changing circumstances of adoption and reproductive politics in the West and South Korea, the figure of the orphan has had an enduring legacy in dominant social imaginaries about child welfare in a global context. Legal norms, social conventions, and cultural representations in the Euro-American West reinforce the idea that the children who are adopted are “orphans” in need of immediate rescue from the “third world.” The orphan myth has not only misrepresented adoptees—many of whom long believed that they were true orphans, but have come to realize that they have existing parents and relatives in South Korea—it also erases history and power. Ever since the “war orphans” of the 1950s, the orphan in Korean and other transnational adoption has obscured the structural violence of the Cold War and neoliberal economic policies, permitting Americans in particular to “save” children who are themselves often victims of American foreign policy decisions (Briggs 2006). This salvation narrative has required adult adoptees to be grateful for having been rescued from a life of abjection and reinscribes a line between the dehumanized and excluded lives of orphans and the political lives of adoptees as members of first world nations (see Agamben 1998).

This retelling of the early history of adoption is not an attempt to de-legitimize actual relationships of love and kinship formed from Korean adoption, but, rather, to examine what Ann Stoler calls the “tense and tender ties” (2006) of empire, the microprocesses of power that reinforce or reproduce relationships of dominance in the most private realms of the family and the household. This orientation helps move our thinking beyond the sentimentalization and universalizing of the child to ask more critical questions about the ambivalence and ambiguity wrought by intimate relations embedded in and structured by state power and dynamics of domination and resistance. The ambivalence and irony of Korean adoption is that family intimacies were also relations of intimate diplomacy, in which geopolitical interests and biopolitical concerns converged in the midst of vast political and economic inequalities between Cold War allies.

¹ The adoption of children across national borders is referred to by several different terms. In the U.S., “inter-country” and “intercountry” adoption (ICA) were most frequently used to refer to these adoptions in the post-WWII era. “International adoption” began to be used in the 1970s and is the most commonly cited term today. Intercountry adoptions in the 1950s and 60s were predominantly forms of “kinship adoption.” Most of these European children were sent for adoption by extended family due to the social disruptions and dislocations of WWII, or for greater economic and educational opportunities in so-called family adoptions (Hochfield 1954: 145). A smaller proportion of these children were non-relative adoptions, in which parents in the U.S. decided to adopt a needy foreign child with humanitarian or family-centric motives. International adoption today generally refers to the bringing of non-relative children into white American homes. The vast majority of these adoptions are also transracial adoptions, a term that came into usage around the adoptions of “black” and mixed-race children into mostly “white” families in the U.S. during the 1960s. I follow the conventions of the period, using “intercountry” or “international” adoption interchangeably.

² Bertha Holt wrote in the preface to *Bring My Sons from Afar* (1986), “In 1955, when Harry was on his way to Korea, God showed him his directions. In a Tokyo hotel the verses of *Isaiah 43:5, 6 & 7* were revealed to him when he asked for confirmation. ‘Fear not, for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up: and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from afar and my daughters

from the ends of the earth: Even everyone who is called by my name; for I have created him for my glory. I have formed him; yeah, I have made him.”

³ See Hubinette (2004, 2006, Ch. 2) for a concise overview of Korean adoption history.

⁴ Following Holt's death in 1964, Bertha Holt assumed the helm at Holt Adoption Agency (which is now Holt International Children's Services). Bertha Holt died in 2000, and one of their daughters, Molly Holt, became chairman of Holt Children's Services, which is now an independent entity from the American-based agency. Holt International Children's Services, based in Eugene, Oregon, now has intercountry adoption programs in 14 countries and has placed over 100,000 children into new families. Their mission is still clearly a Christian one "...dedicated to carrying out God's plan for every child to have a permanent, loving family" (www.holtintl.org/intro.shtml).

⁵ See, for instance, some of the critiques published on the website Transracial Abductees (www.transracialabductees.org).

⁶ For example, in February 1959, the *Honolulu Star Bulletin* article, "South Korea 'exports' children" was to be precisely echoed thirty years later by western journalists critiquing South Korea's adoption of children overseas as its largest export commodity. See Choy (2007) on the proxy adoption controversy.

⁷ The terms "waif" and "mascot" were popular during WWII as well, when American soldiers befriended child victims of the war while stationed in Europe.

⁸ "GI babies" referred to children fathered by American servicemen, and "UN babies" to children fathered by members of the UN forces. They were often used interchangeably. In Korean, these children were referred to as *bonhyōla* (mixed-blood children), while *chōnjaeng koa* referred generally to war orphans.

⁹ North Korea also publicly condemned South Korea in 1977 and 1988. Both instances led to a South Korean government reconsideration of the "adoption problem" (*ibyang munje*). North Korea also had many needy and orphaned children following the war, and they were reportedly sent to eastern bloc countries and Mongolia, to be adopted or fostered. According to the *Washington Post*, a home was being built to house 200 North Korean children scheduled to arrive in East Germany in November 1952, with 200 more soon expected. It has also been reported that these children were eventually repatriated to North Korea as adults, and they were honored as war heroes and granted high-ranking government posts.

¹⁰ According to Korean American Voluntary Association's (KAVA) records, foreign organizations donated close to \$350 million in monetary and material donations between 1950 and 1970 (cited in W.K. Choi 1995: 72).

¹¹ The film, directed by Douglas Sirk, was an opportunity for the South Korean state to capitalize on the photogenic sentimentality of Korean orphans—25 "real-life" orphans from the original evacuation were flown to Hollywood to appear in the film (*Los Angeles Times* 1956). See the Korean War Children's Memorial Project website for more details about Operation Kiddy Car (www.koreanchildren.org) and its "real hero," Army chaplain, Russell Blaisdell.

¹² A Proquest search for "Korean orphan" or "Korean waif" brings up more than 300 articles for the decade 1950-1959 and a similar number for the decade 1960-1969 in major U.S. newspapers.

¹³ The irony of the American military's role in Korean adoptions is reflected in letters from teenage Korean American adoptees today who thank Korean War veterans for their own existence as adoptees in America. (<http://www.koreanchildren.org/docs/letterstoveterans.html>).

¹⁴ On the Korean end, prior to the writing up of a law for the adoption of children by foreigners, releases of the children were obtained from the child's parents or guardians (orphanage directors) and the adoptions were certified by local government officials. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs then issued a passport for the child and the U.S. Consular office issued visas (Minutes of the 25th Meeting of the Joint ROK/KCAC/UNKRA Committee for Child Welfare, April 8, 1954).

¹⁵ "Convincing Congress that race neutrality, not race separation, is consistent with American ideals meant shifting the collective notion of belonging to America by highlighting a common humanity that overpowered racial differences. Petitioners, ineligible for membership in the American community, could individually take advantage of the changing tide by portraying themselves as a member of a nuclear family, or an antifascist or anticommunist hero" (Ota 2001: 210-11).

¹⁶ Ninety percent of inter-country adoptions in 1954 were by American military personnel who adopted mixed-race children in Japan.

¹⁷ Mrs. Hong was the director of Child Placement Service (CPS), the government approved agency that worked closely with ISS to place the first Korean children in American families. Susan T. Pettiss to Ellen T. Visser, February 3, 1955. International Social Service, American Branch papers. Box 35, "ISS-Branches Korea 1954-Dec 1955" folder. Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota. See Berebitsky (2000) on the history of singles adopting in America.

¹⁸ This ad, which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, continues, "Many inquire, 'How can I help Korean Orphans?' Although few can bring them to this country, YOU can be a Mother or Daddy to your own child in a Christian orphanage in Korea...Yours for the asking! Clip and send away for brochure, 'How to Adopt an Orphan.'"

¹⁹ And in its final report, the Administrator of the RRA described the "Orphan Program" as not only providing new homes for over 4,000 destitute children and bringing happiness to many childless American homes, but "the friendly international relations engendered by America's helping hand stretched out to these children were a forward step toward better international understanding and lasting peace in the world" (quoted in Pettiss 1958: 28).

²⁰ Public Law 203, 83rd Congress, H.R. 6481, passed August 7, 1953.

²¹ Many German children, for instance, were adopted to the U.S. after WWII, but unless the quota for German immigrants was oversubscribed, they would not have entered the U.S. through the RRA (Pettiss 1958). Not only were immigration laws of the day racist and exclusionary, anti-miscegenation laws in some southern states prohibited adoption across racial lines, and segregation laws even prevented some intercountry adoptees from attending the public schools (Susan T. Pettiss to Grace Rue 1955). It is worth remembering that it was not until the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* decision that the Supreme Court declared anti-miscegenation laws to be unconstitutional. Today, sixteen states have yet to void laws against interracial marriage from their books.

²² ISS, first established in Geneva in 1914, had been, since WWII, a main advocate for refugees and displaced persons. ISS-American Branch (ISS-AB) was the main office in the United States. It coordinated the fostering of British children by American families, and helped with refugee relocation, but during the 25 years following WWII, intercountry adoptions became the primary focus of ISS. WAIF (World Adoption International Fund) was started in 1954 and became the main fundraising arm for ISS-AB (Ostling 1978: 367-371). Much of their work in the mid- to late-1950s was focused on finding and establishing appropriate legal and procedural channels to regulate international adoption, and to ensure that these adoptions met basic standards of child welfare.

²³ Elaine Tyler May writes, "With the onset of the Cold War, the family surfaced as the ideological center of national culture, while public and community

life declined.... The fierce pronatalism of the baby-boom years marked infertility as profoundly tragic and voluntary childlessness as downright subversive” (1995: 18).

²⁴ The specter of infertility, or “childlessness,” as it was euphemistically referred to, was one that couples had to address, in often embarrassing detail to social workers who questioned them about their sex lives.

²⁵ Birthmothers who relinquished children in those years organized a support group in the 1970s that openly critiqued the culture of secrecy in American adoption, advocated for opening birth records, as well as for search and reunion, and aimed to debunk the myth that forgetting and moving on after relinquishing a child was “healthy” (Modell 2002). See Solinger (1994) on the implications of race and gender in the treatment of illegitimacy among young black women.

²⁶ Although some cases of single adoptive parents were allowed in Korean adoption, the Korean government’s regulations today require couples to be married for at least three years, and to demonstrate a stable relationship. Single persons wanting to adopt through state welfare agencies in the 1950s were turned down as they would be “unable to offer a real ‘family’ to a child,” according one California state social worker in 1957.

²⁷ According to a 1956 study of children from Europe and Asia who had been placed in white homes by a Boston-based agency, those who expressed interest in “American-Oriental” children were usually couples with children who had a “spiritual motive” to help the child “suffering the social ostracism” (DiVirgilio 1956: 18). But letters from prospective parents I read from the South Korean state archives were often from childless couples or from those hoping to add to their families, sometimes to replace children who had died, or even to replace a loved one, either husband or son, who had died in the Korean War.

²⁸ Korean children were adopted exclusively by American families until CPS started a program with Sweden in 1965. Following that, other European countries began receiving Korean children.

²⁹ Syngman Rhee Documents, VI-4 File 7, #11750086.

³⁰ Syngman to Im Byung Jik, April 8, 1954. Ironically, Syngman Rhee and his Austrian wife never had biological children, but, instead, adopted two full-Korean sons.

³¹ Syngman Rhee Documents, File VI-4, #11750041. 21 October 1953.

³² Syngman Rhee Documents, File VI-4 #11750048. This family-centric approach to child preference, that is, designing the family to have the child “fit” by age and/or gender with the other children, is corroborated by Kim and Reid’s study of adoptive families in Minnesota (1970).

³³ Syngman Rhee Documents VI-4, File 7, #11750068.

³⁴ Syngman Rhee Documents, VI-4, File 7, #11750072.

³⁵ Syngman Rhee Documents, VI-4, File 7, #11750076.

³⁶ Syngman Rhee Documents, VI-4, File 7, #11750086.

³⁷ Syngman Rhee Documents, VI-4 File 9, #11750186.

³⁸ Syngman Rhee Documents, VI-4 File 9, #11750191.

³⁹ Syngman Rhee Documents, VI-4 File 9, #11750198.

⁴⁰ A follow-up article in *McCall’s* presents a different story. It claims that Sul Ja was welcomed “home” by the Casey’s two years after the initial inquiry, in an article entitled, “Adoption by Picture.” Nearly fifty years later, the child who had been adopted by the Caseys was reunited with her sister and other former orphanage children. She learned from them that she was not, in fact, Sul Ja, but that Sul Ja had stayed at the orphanage.

⁴¹ *Oegyo anbu yonguwon* (Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security), “Overseas adoption of orphans, 1956-60” file, *Kyung Mu Dae* (Presidential Residence) Documents.

⁴² Syngman Rhee Documents VI-4, File 11, #11750358.

⁴³ In 1949, Pierce founded Great Commission Films (which later became World Wide Pictures under the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association) with director Dick Ross (Hamilton 1980).

⁴⁴ SWHA, Box 35, “Korea: Reports and Visits to Korea 1956-” Activity Report of ISS Korea, April 15-16, 1966, Geneva, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Syngman Rhee Documents, VI-4, File 11, #11750358.

⁴⁶ Katherine Moon’s seminal work on military camptown (*kejich’on*) women provides a parallel example of how military prostitutes were enrolled by the South Korean state as “instruments of foreign policy,” through “people-to-people diplomacy” intended to foster improved relations between the U.S. and South Korea (1997: 84).

⁴⁷ “There is quite a bit of rivalry and competition among the different agencies, and it is not beyond agencies to bribe or pressure the mothers for the release of these children, and agencies including ISS have to go to find the Korean-Caucasian children by visiting prostitute areas, as it is not a common practice for the mothers to approach the agencies for the release of their children” (SWHA, Box 35, “Korea: Reports and Visits to Korea 1956-” Report on Korea, August 1966).

⁴⁸ Han Hyun Sook, a Korean social worker and long time adoption professional with Children’s Home Society of Minnesota, writes with some remorse and ambivalence in her memoir about her role in intercountry adoptions as a young social worker for ISS in the 1960s: “I misunderstood my job and thought I was supposed to make the birth mothers relinquish their children; I pushed those mothers to sign the papers.... The way I tried was to convince those mothers that their children were better off coming with me and being adopted internationally.... Back then, the area of social work was relatively new to Korea and so we had no models to follow” (2007: 100-01).

⁴⁹ SWHA, Box 35, “Reports and Visits to Korea 1956-” Patricia Nye, Report on Korea, March 23-26, 1976.

⁵⁰ SWHA, Box 35, “Korea: Reports and Visits to Korea 1956-” Report on Korea, August 1966.

⁵¹ But see Han (2007), who describes the first domestic adoption program in Korea, Christian Adoption Program of Korea (CAPOK), an American missionary project which was eventually merged with Holt Adoption Agency. Han, through CAPOK, also began the first program for unwed mothers in 1970 and helped to establish Ae Ran Won in 1971 as the first home for unwed mothers.

⁵² SWHA, Box 35, “Reports and Visits to Korea 1956-” Patricia Nye, Report on Korea, March 23-26, 1976.

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