



Elena J. Kim

*Adopted Territory:
Transnational Korean Adoptees and the
Politics of Belonging*

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reviewed by [Richard Gehrman](#)

1. The title of *Adopted Territory* reveals a new construction of identity formed by contemporary communications technology and by international conferences, an example of globalisation shaping an evolving hybrid ethnic identity across the Asia-Pacific. Transnational or intercountry adoption is intimately connected with issues of birth, motherhood, parenting and women's bodies, and Elena Kim has made a significant contribution to the study of a regional issue of gender relations through her book. This topic is a very significant one, not least because the community of overseas Korean adoptees worldwide numbers 200,000. In almost all instances, adoption means relinquishment of a child by a woman, and it most commonly involves the adoption of a child by a male and female couple. There is an international political dimension to this, as it almost always results in the movement of children from the global South to the global North. Elena Kim's book recounts the stories and lived experiences of an evolving cultural community, the community of Korean intercountry adoptees resident in the United States who seek to re-establish an association with the country of their birth. This is a community undergoing change, and technology has contributed to opening up the potential for contact as never before. The development of relationships between adoptees has been facilitated by regular conferences and by the widespread application of home-based Internet usage among groups since the 1990s. The subsequent blurring of national boundaries and the phenomenon that Peter Burke calls cultural hybridity^[1] has enabled South Korean adoptees to create a new identity, and this identity has become a vibrant and effective feature in the post-Cold War era of globalisation.
2. *Adopted Territory* is a book that captures the experience of Korean-born adult adoptees and repositions them far away from earlier representations that over-emphasise associations between adoption and the helpless child. The dominant discourses of intercountry adoption studies are primarily situated with birth parents, children as orphans, or adoptive families for adopted children. In a field of research dominated by social work and psychology some research (perhaps unintentionally) represents intercountry adoptees as individuals who are fundamentally 'unhappy' (p. 9). Adoptees are positioned within a framework of adjustment which reduces the adoptees' world to one dimension, a dimension based on the majority host society's well-meaning but sometimes patronising desire to evaluate their positive and negative experiences. Elena Kim's research positions intercountry adoptees away from this binary logic of child rescue versus exploitation, or happy adoption versus unhappy adoption, and allows them to be seen as themselves.

3. Kim initially demarcates the boundaries by placing the South Korean intercountry adoptive experience within its historical and cultural framework. From 1950 to 1952 Korea was devastated by war and in the succeeding decade experienced poverty as the country underwent rebuilding. War and poverty had meant that there were few resources to support orphaned, illegitimate or abandoned children. Domestic and external forces shaped the Korean intercountry adoption phenomenon. The deeply entrenched Korean patriarchal cultural values rejected the adoption from members of one Confucian genealogy to another, and a patriarchal society rejected unmarried parenting. This was combined with the well-intentioned actions of religious welfare groups and government organisations and resulted in the institutionalisation of an intercountry adoption culture.
4. The second phase of intercountry adoption is arrival and settlement with a family in a new country and Kim moves onto the intercountry adoption experience in the United States. This is an experience of growing up in what might be a caring and well-meaning society, but one that was dominated by whiteness (and very often, homogeneity). There have however been changes. While in the 1950s adoption routinely meant assimilation of adoptees and cutting all links to their birth culture, for the past thirty years adoption best practice has been to acknowledge and celebrate the birth culture of children. A further change is the horizontal interactions between South Korean intercountry adoptees themselves who hope to re-discover a lost cultural heritage through study of language and culture. Such associations serve to initiate the evolution of a new cultural community of adoptees who are now aware of their hybrid culture as they reach out to each other.
5. In contemporary times one rite of adoption life experience has been for intercountry adoptees to visit their country of origin upon reaching adulthood. However, adoptees attempting to form relationships with their place of origin are faced with a reality check when the much anticipated return visit takes place. While the rhetoric of adoption encourages such links to the birth country, there can be disappointment and trauma when those in the birth country do not always respond as adoptees expect them to, despite the public image of welcoming them on 'fatherland tours'. In South Korea there is ambivalence towards adoptees by both the government and by individual South Koreans who are challenged by the face to face encounter with returned adoptees (p. 97). While intercountry adoption was once a practice that was either not discussed or was regarded with quiet approval as a mechanism for solving an internal Korean childcare problem, criticism of the adoption program within South Korea grew in strength following North Korean and later international denunciation during the 1988 South Korean Olympics.
6. The process of reconnecting by South Korean intercountry adoptees was given momentum by official South Korean government initiatives and since the 1980s the South Korean government promoted visits as well as legislation that formally gave South Korean adoptees an association with their country of birth. This offered a variant of a South Korean identity to intercountry adoptees, and was a deliberate action by South Korea to reach out to this émigré community of United States-based South Korean intercountry adoptees. Boundaries of identity have become flexible in a twenty-first century world where Italian-Australians can vote in Italian elections—and where Islamic Syrian-Australians may feel obligated to fight in the Middle East. Thus, in a world of shifting identity and moving borders, South Korean intercountry adoptees are no different from others who can find a place in more than one society.
7. The evolution and development of an identifiable cultural group is a key component of Kim's account, and the second part of *Adopted Territory* explains how South Korean intercountry adoptees have become established as a cultural minority in their own right. This is a fascinating ethnographic study by an author who views this from her position as a cultural informant and also from a worldview shaped by her own experiences as the facilitator of intercountry adoption conferences and

gatherings in which groups of intercountry adoptees develop horizontal identities based on their year of birth.

8. Although the central focus of this book is on adoptees, this account incorporates those who Kim calls 'activist birth mothers', and the complexities of the interrelationships between birth mothers and their children. A particularly sad note is revealed in the ambivalence experienced by one adoptee who felt supporting the political activism of his birth mother suggested 'negating [his] own existence' (p. 256). Kim has the courage to discuss the balance between fetishized universal motherhood and the trauma and anguish faced by women who have been compelled to relinquish their children (p. 252). The South Korean birth mother has traditionally been the hidden figure in the adoption triangle, but as South Korea becomes wealthier, these women become ever more significant as today's generation of South Korean mothers are increasingly enabled to make socially supported and informed choices regarding relinquishment. This resonates with the Australian experience. While there are significant differences between state-based forced adoptions in Australia in the 1950s and 60s and Australian intercountry adoption, the national apology to adoptees in March 2013 highlights the importance and sensitivity of this issue in the Australian context.^[2]
9. With its conclusion, *Adopted Territory* emphasises realignment away from established images, in particular the humanitarian image of an orphan as a victim who has been rescued. This re-affirms a particular strength of Kim's account, which is the focus on adult adoptees—far too often intercountry adoptees are seen as vulnerable children ('pitiable adopted children') that they once might (or might not) have been, rather than the adults that they have become (pp. 136, 236). This rebranding of intercountry adoptees is a substantial contribution to ongoing discussions of intercountry adoption.
10. My personal reception of Kim's research was informed from my position as having published on the migrant identity aspects of intercountry adoption and also from involvement with intercountry adoption families. From this subjective perspective, *Adopted Territory* gives a fascinating perspective on the complexity of the intercountry adoption issue globally, as well as in terms of specific aspects of the case study of South Korea. Intercountry adoption can include euphoria and suffering, and intercountry adoptees may find themselves treated as exotic public property by otherwise ethical well-intentioned strangers. If Kim's words have educated those unconnected to adoption, and thus helped to dispel ignorance and therefore ease the daily life of just one intercountry adoptee, she has achieved success on a human level. Community understanding of the nuances of intercountry adoption and sensitivities regarding them has progressed tremendously since the 1950s and for the sake of all adoptees, books such as this are so important in telling the story of an experience that is far removed from the hype surrounding the tiny minority of un-representative Hollywood celebrity adoptions. In a world where established frameworks of race, citizenship, nationality, family and identity have their own authority, this book offers examples of how adoptees can present alternative frameworks with which to understand their world and how they can challenge existing social hegemony.

Notes

^[1] Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.

^[2] See for example Marian Quartly, Shurlee Swain and Denise Cuthbert, *The Market in Babies – Stories of Australian Adoption*, Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2013; Denise Cuthbert and Marian Quartly, "'Forced adoption" in the Australian story of national regret and apology,' *Australian Journal of Politics & History* vol. 58, no.1 (2012): 82–96; Patricia Fronek and Denise Cuthbert, 'Apologies for forced adoption practices: Implications for contemporary intercountry adoption,' *Australian Social Work* vol. 66, no. 3 (2013): 402–14.

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