

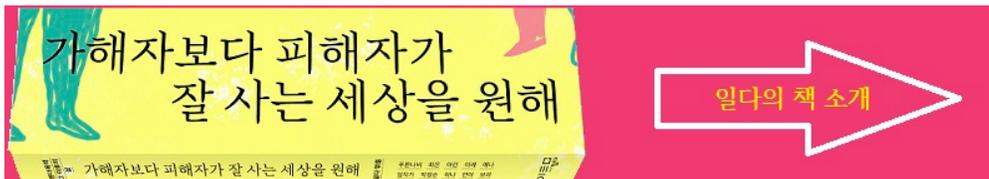
사회 노동 녹색정치 국경너머 소수자 시선 문화 일다의 방 English Article



Don't Tell Me to be Thankful for Being Adopted to a 'Nice' Country

Listening to the experiences of overseas adoptee women: Activism as post adoption services(1)

Julayne Lee | 기사입력 2022/10/06 [18:55]



Editor's note: South Korea has a long history of sending its children abroad for adoption. The issue of overseas adoption is connected to issues of women's and children rights, poverty and discrimination, and race and migration. By listening to the voices of women who grew up in other societies and then returned to the country of their birth, Ilda hopes to hear their experiences and the messages they hold for Korean society. This series is supported by the Korea Press Foundation's Press Promotion Fund.

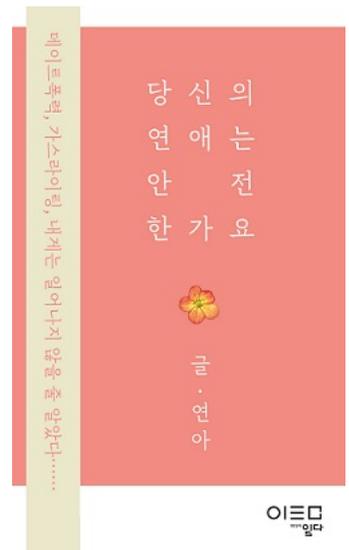
Introduction

In a meeting with overseas adopted Koreans (OAKs) I remember hearing someone say that Adoptee Solidarity Korea (ASK, 2004 – 2017) was her post adoption services (PAS). Participating in ASK was how she worked out her adoption experience and journey. It has been similar for me and when I heard her say this I understood why I needed to be involved in advocacy work in the overseas adopted Korean (OAK) community. It was about rectifying the past and bringing an end to a practice that was no longer necessary and that has failed far too many.

What began as a humanitarian gesture had evolved into the reinforcement of the stigma of unwed mothers in South Korea and the intentional division of families. It is because of my desire to seek justice that I joined the planning committee for the Dual Citizenship Act, served on the ASK Steering Committee, joined the coalition to secure retroactive U.S. citizenship for all intercountry adoptees, co-founded Adoptee Solidarity Korea – Los Angeles (ASK – LA) and launched a writing workshop for adopted people of color. If we want equality and access, we have to create these opportunities and keep these spaces accessible.

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▲ Me (the author), a poet, writer, and educator. ©Julayne Lee

Why was I sent abroad for adoption?

Growing up, I was told many things about the reasons for my adoption but never anything concrete. Yet, these stories shaped what I believed about my past. Perhaps my mother was a university student when she became pregnant and needed to finish school so she relinquished me. I sort of laugh now at this narrative as in my adult life, I've never heard this scenario. Wouldn't that have been a nice story of how children become available for adoption?

More common are stories of poverty, infidelity, abuse, corruption on the part of our Korean families, or an unwed mother stigmatized by Korean society and coerced by hospital and agency workers to relinquish her child in exchange for payment of her hospital fees. Perhaps my Korean mother was incapable of taking care of me due to mental illness, drug addiction, economic hardship or social discrimination. Not as nice a story as a university student whose birth control failed.

I was also told that if I hadn't been adopted, I may have ended up homeless, dead or living a life of prostitution. I've since learned that this is what some of the adoption agencies would tell prospective adopters to manipulate them into adopting. It is after all a business that needs a steady supply of children to meet the demand of the adoption market.

In 2001 while working full time and finishing graduate school, I began connecting with adult overseas adopted Koreans (OAKs). In preparation for my first return to South Korea that summer, I scoured the internet in search of answers to my identity and heritage, which had been oppressed, nearly erased and all but fabricated to be something I could never really be, similar to many a Korean drama storyline.

Assimilation can be delusional, toxic and deadly. The more I learned about the history of inter-country adoption (ICA) as a result of the Korean War and that it was still happening at an unacceptable high rate left me feeling like I needed to do something to either end ICA or at least decrease the number of South Korean children being sent away from their country of origin.

Feeling anger at South Korea's current affluence

최신기사

Affirming Myself, a Fat Bisexual



변방에서 광주에서 '광장의 예술'을 기획하는 사람



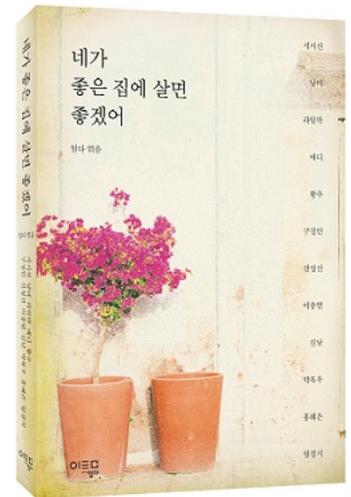
여성단체 활동가도 노동자로서의 권리가 있잖아요



착한 여자가 되려 하지 마, 자신의 '경계'를 세워라



쌀값 폭등 '식량위기' 압박한 일본 반면교사 삼아야



In the summer of 2001 I spent over a month in South Korea meeting OAKs from Europe, the US and Australia. Weren't we all happy and thankful to be adopted? I grappled with being told I should be grateful for being adopted and witnessing the trauma, grief and loss experienced by other OAKs which I also experienced but had suppressed for several years. After all, I had an education and opportunities I may not have had if I'd stayed in S. Korea, but I'm not sure how much value there is in hypothesizing my life. There is no proof that my life opportunities would have been better, worse or the same had I stayed in S. Korea.

The question was always, "Isn't it better that you were adopted rather than being raised in an orphanage?" If only it were so simple. Another option would have been to stay with my Korean family. I also learned that sometimes babies were left at Buddhist temples and monks would take them in and add the children to their family registry, legitimizing them in Korean society. During one of our discussions, someone stated that just because you have an education doesn't mean you're happy. Indeed that couldn't be closer to the truth.

After visiting South Korea and seeing that the peninsula had all but recovered from the Korean War, it made me question even more why ICA was continuing. It angered me to see people living more affluently than I had been in the U.S. when supposedly I'd been sent away so that I could have a "better life." Better than what?

I was involved in my local OAK association in Minnesota, served on the board and spoke at culture camps. However, there was always this nagging feeling that there was something very wrong with South Korean ICA continuing. I cringed and wanted to weep when I would see newly adopted South Koreans. I spoke quietly with a few friends about this but in many ways felt silenced in the Korean adoptee community - I felt it would have been taboo to even suggest that ICA could be wrong or should end.

I began meeting several first wave/generation OAKs, many of whom were multiracial and incredibly grateful they'd been adopted. While I respect their experience and their perspective, it didn't change S. Korea's current economic standing and the questions around the politics of ICA. To me it was a history to be ashamed of: a country that continued to export its own citizens while enjoying economic prosperity and success. If that's the definition of success, then I wonder what failure looks like.



▲ Though I was told only vague stories about the reasons for my adoption, these stories shaped what I believed about my past. ©Ilda (Illustration: Doona)

People who agree that South Korea should stop exporting its citizens

As I continued to navigate my way through the OAK community and the lingo and acronyms, post-adoption services (PAS) were often mentioned. However, this seemed to be more culturally focused and mostly with OAKs 18 years old and younger: culture camps, dance groups, cooking and language classes and museum visits. Ironically, these types of events that were offered for adult OAKs at times seemed demeaning and condescending. Being a student and learner doesn't mean I need to be treated like a child and as though I'm of low intelligence. I've taken Korean cooking classes but am nowhere near proficient in making kimchi.

While I benefited from my local adult OAK association, at a certain point there was something missing – it wasn't enough. I wanted to start a group that looked at South Korean ICA from a more political perspective and that would aim to end ICA from S. Korea. I wanted to discuss what was wrong with ICA in addition to learning about my lost heritage. But I didn't feel that I could even talk about this for fear of being marginalized within the Korean adoptee community and in society in general.

In 2004 I moved back to S. Korea to live and work for an indefinite period of time. I had a one-way ticket, no job, a few contacts and a place to stay temporarily at Koroot, a guest house for overseas adopted Koreans.. I had sort of put the idea of an OAK organization in the back of my mind because it just didn't seem possible. Nevertheless, my stance on ICA had not changed. If anything, it was more firm than ever.

In the process of moving, I received an email from a friend who had been living in Seoul for a few years. She invited me to a launch meeting of adopted Koreans who were going to discuss why ICA was problematic and explore how we might increase awareness around these issues and also provide alternatives to ICA. I'll never forget receiving that email because it was incredibly validating to know there were others with similar points of view. Adoptees halfway around the world whom I'd never met, had wanted the same thing - a space to discuss and analyze the complexity of adoption. I read the email multiple times because I couldn't believe I was going to connect with people who would understand my thoughts and views and that an organization was actually going to be launched. The timing of the launch of Adoptee Solidarity Korea (ASK) couldn't have been more perfect for my move to Seoul.

Doesn't a child have a right to know their own history?

PAS is still often seen as services to connect OAKs to culture and explore identity, yet adoption agencies do not provide services for adults. Identity is a very broad term and I believe should be defined by the individual and not by an institution or organization. It is neither concrete nor finite. For me, my identity journey as an adoptee would not be authentic without having a space to explore my thoughts, perspectives and feelings of discomfort around ICA and being validated for my critique of ICA.

Seeing ICA as a human rights issue made it pretty clear to me that being silent no more was my only option. Numerous human rights violations occur in the human transaction of ICA: violations of the child and their family of origin, especially the mother. How do we justify one human being making life-altering decisions about the direction of another's life? Perhaps if you've watched enough Korean dramas, it seems this is the norm in South Korean society albeit with some horrible consequences and in the end the truth comes out and the perpetrators pay a high price.

If a child has a right to an education, do they also not have a right to know their own history as part of that education? Knowing your family history as well as your ethnic heritage should be a basic human right.

Living in South Korea meant I was faced daily with the complexity of ICA: seeing young OAKs return with their white parents, listening to single mothers talk about their struggles and deliberating whether or not to out myself to colleagues for fear they'd start with the routine yet inappropriate and invasive questions about my personal identity. Do you speak Korean? Have you met your Korean family? Did you attend culture camps? Do you like kimchi? And how each of these questions would be laced with shame and guilt for an erasure of my identity that had been forced upon me. I was constantly reminded that I was an OAK whether it was a taxi driver, a shopkeeper or foreigner putting my identity on trial. This to me is the burden of being a Korean adoptee as stated in the film project Side by Side.

Being part of ASK gave me purpose beyond my personal goals of travel and living in my country of origin. I was on a mission yet I was often criticized and questioned by friends as to why I'd be part of this organization and have been told I'm radical, militant and political. I disagree. As one of our members said, "It isn't radical. It's what should be happening." The fact that we received backlash is no surprise and actually confirmed for me that what we were doing was right and the very existence of ASK was progress. While difficult to take at times, the criticism made me stronger and fueled my passion to bring ICA to an end.

The much needed stand that ASK took on a controversial issue at a time when it was uncommon and definitely unpopular to critique ICA from a progressive point of view was groundbreaking. The founders were trailblazers and took a risk. Had they not taken that strategic risk, I'm not sure I would have lived in South Korea as long as I did. And ICA would still be out of control. ASK was my PSA and facilitated a significant part of my adoption journey.

The South Korean government should help reunite families separated by adoption

I lived and worked in Seoul 2004 – 2008 and taught English at Sungkyunkwan University (SKKU) and Hangeuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS). Each semester my students had lessons on ICA so they could gain a better understanding of S. Korea's social welfare system and develop basic adoption vocabulary. I knew ICA was still a rather taboo topic in S. Korean society, but I felt a responsibility to challenge my students. The work of ASK played a large role in shaping this curriculum and creating a shift in society.

What I learned through ASK also prompted me to work on the Dual Citizenship Campaign which as of January 1, 2011 now allows OAKs to voluntarily reclaim their S. Korean citizenship if their receiving country recognizes dual citizenship – something that we should never have been stripped of.

While regaining our Korean citizenship does not close the emotional gap of a life lived in the west, we now have a choice. I've witnessed the pride that comes with reclaiming this status and if it made a difference to one adoptee, then this validates the support the Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (GOA'L) provides to assist with the legal process. <https://www.goal.or.kr/citizenship>

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