

# From orphan trains to babylifts: Colonial trafficking, empire building, and social engineering.

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From orphan trains to babylifts: Colonial trafficking, empire building, and social engineering

▼ HÅ¼binette, Tobias

Stockholm University, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Oriental Languages. koreanska.

2006 (English) In: Outsiders within: Writing on transracial adoption, South End Press , 2006, p. 139-149 Chapter in book (Other (popular science, discussion, etc.))

## Abstract [en]

International adoption, sometimes known as intercountry or transnational adoption, the movement of mainly non-white children from the postcolonial so-called "Third World" to predominantly white adopters in North America, Northern and Western Europe, and Australia and New Zealand, was born in the mid-1950s in the aftermath of the Korean War. This huge child migration which today involves close to 30,000 children annually, has transferred an estimated half a million children, of whom almost one third come from Korea. In the receiving countries, the practice was initiated as a rescue mission with strong Christian undertones, while it came to be perceived as a progressive act of solidarity during the 1960s and 1970s. Today, in the leading adopting regions of North America, Western Europe, and Oceania, international adoption has developed into the last resort for many suffering from infertility, while a discourse of multiculturalism celebrates international adoptees as bridges between cultures, symbols of interethnic harmony, and embodiments of global and postmodern cosmopolitans. Academically, studies of international adoption are usually limited to the fields of medicine and psychiatry, or to social work and psychology. At the other end in the sending countries, the governments conceive of international adoption as part family planning method and part child welfare

practice. Despite regular outbursts of criticism towards the practice coming from domestic oppositional circles in the countries of origin, most governments treat international adoption as a necessary evil, even though they consider it a degrading and humiliating business, well aware that the practice saves social welfare expenditure and generates huge amounts of money for a profitable adoption industry.

Instead of following in the footsteps of these dominant ways of looking at international adoption and merely reproducing mainstream adoption research, I will examine and analyze the practice from a different perspective, employing the lenses of anthropology and migration history, American empire building and international relations, and Korean military authoritarianism and patriarchal modernity. I will use international adoption from Korea as the principal case study, as Korea has by far provided the most internationally adopted children, and since the practice itself was initiated in connection with the Korean War. International adoption will be put in relation to a particular Western mode of adopting, and to other previous and contemporary child and forced migrations, and set within the context of emerging American world dominance after World War II. At the other end, international adoption will be connected to Korea's modernization process, and seen as a disciplining method of regulating and controlling women's bodies and reproduction in the name of social engineering and development. Lastly, I am arguing that to fully understand international adoption's history and current articulation, it is necessary to study it from many different angles and perspectives.

**Place, publisher, year, edition, pages**

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