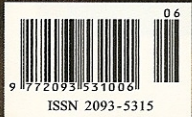


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A Collection of One:

Convincing South Korea's National Assembly to Pass the Adoption Law Revision Bill

On June 10th, TRACK and volunteers were in their second day of preparing for and assembling their highly anticipated art exhibition named "A Collection of One". The white PVC pipes lay waiting in tight bundles against one wall of South Korea's National Assembly's atrium. They would soon be erected to form the skeleton of the exhibition's two-meter-high tunnel. At the other end of the atrium, a row of industrious volunteers sat at tables stamping numbers onto tag-sized "travel certificates", each of which represented a Korean child lost to international adoption. They would later be hung on the inside of the tunnel's cloth panels. In a third corner, two sewing machines clacked away as white poly fabric was fed through them and made into sieves for the pipes.

As I sat on the floor measuring out fabric for the tunnel's cloth cover, the marble atrium echoed with the sounds of mass production. Law makers passed through and glanced at the 70 or so baby photos of Korean children that stood propped on the atrium's AC units. Those that took a closer look at the photos saw the rectangles of paper displaying adoption case numbers pinned to the children's shirts. The photos, which lined the sides of the spacious hall, were a startling contrast of color. Some were a grainy black and white while others had color ranging from faded to bright, reflecting the sixty years that inter-country adoption from Korea has existed.

TRACK, which stands for Truth and Reconciliation for the Adopted Community of Korea was originally founded by a team of five adoptees: two Americans and three Europeans. Since 2009, it has been led by Jane Jeong Trenka, Korean-American adoptee and author of *Language of Blood*. The organization, based in Seoul, "advocate[s] for full knowledge of past and present Korean adoption practices to protect the human rights of adult adoptees, children, and families," as printed in TRACK's leaflet.

Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, nearly 200,000 children have been adopted from abroad to 14 different

The inside of the tunnel, with travel certificates representing the document Korean adopted children carry to their new countries tagged to the wall

Jane Jeong Trenka

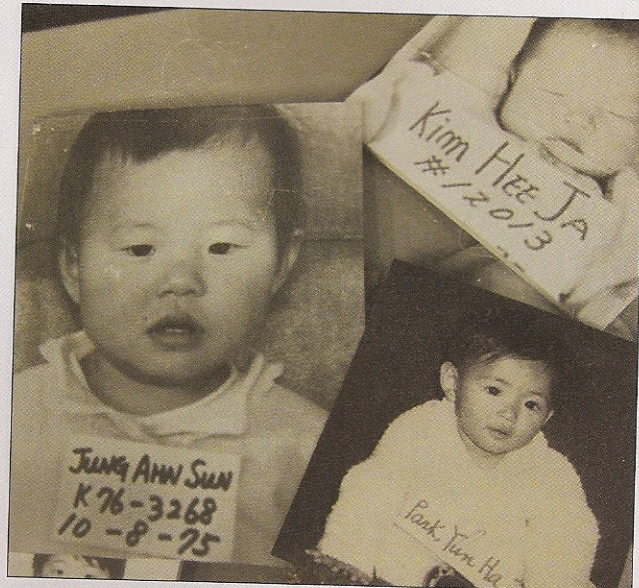
countries. Originally installed for humanitarian purposes in the 1950s when Korea was still a war-torn country, international adoption grew in the 1970s and 1980s, peaking in 1985 with nearly 9,000 Korean children placed abroad. Despite Korea's status as a developed nation, over 1,000 children, most of whom are babies, are still being flown out and placed into new families. Despite the widespread belief that flying babies to families who promise to provide them with a good home and a lot of love is in the child's best interest, the truth behind international adoption requires a more careful look at the social and economic forces that promote it.

Since its founding in 2007, TRACK has worked to raise awareness of the plight of unwed mothers in Korea through public awareness campaigns and information sessions. Most international adoptions from Korea are made possible because unwed mothers are pressured to give up their children due to social stigma and lack of government support. Since the 1990s, their children have made up 83-99.9% of the total number sent abroad for adoption, with roughly half this percentage the case in the 1970s and 1980s. The many forces that have driven the adoption program since its founding include Korea's rapid industrialization efforts that relocated hundreds of thousands of young women from the countryside to cities from the 1960s onward, an intense family planning system set in place in the 1960s to reduce overpopulation, centuries old Confucia-based norms that denounce unwed mothers and favor boys over girls, and the large market for adoptable babies from Western countries.

By building the art installation in the very place where the nation's law makers meet and debate on legislation, TRACK chose to bring the campaign directly to the government to convince them that Korea's inter-country adoption system is in dire need of revision.

TRACK planned for weeks to put together the seven-day art installation ahead of Parliament's 2010 regular session where the adoption law revision bill will be brought to the floor. This bill, submitted by TRACK supporter, Representative Choi Young-hee of the main opposition Democratic Party, is historic in nature in that, if passed, it will be the first time overseas Korean adoptees and Korean unwed single mothers, the ones most affected by international adoption, will have been included in the drafting and editing of an adoption bill.

The revision law would mandate a number of changes to the system. It would require that all adoptions,



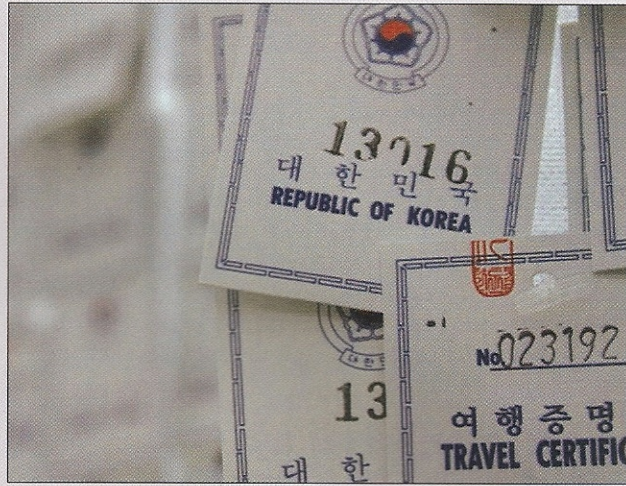
Baby photos of Korean adoptees

Solim Sirgey

which are conducted by private agencies in Korea, be monitored by the state. TRACK has already submitted six cases of mishandled adoptions which were reviewed by the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission and has been a vocal critic of the unchecked practices of the adoption agencies. It would also give mothers a thirty-day consideration period after childbirth to allow them sufficient time to reconsider relinquishing their babies. Many unwed mothers today that use unwed mothers' homes, 17 out of 24 of which are run by the adoption agencies themselves, sign away their baby before they are even born and later regret their decision.

Furthermore, the law would be the next crucial step toward the nation's ratification and endorsement of the two major international treaties that protect family and children's rights. Both the 1989 Hague Convention on Inter-country Adoption and the 1993 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulate that international adoption should be a "last resort" if all else fails by the state to keep the child cared for in his/her birth family and country of origin.

South Korea is currently the world's 13th largest economy, yet spends the second to least on social welfare per capita of the thirty-one Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. It has furthermore dominated the adoption market for 60 years as the largest sending country of adopted children and currently ranks 5th in this index. Trenka argues that Korea has the means to take care of



Left: Leanne Leith tagging a travel certificate, Jes Eriksen ; Right: Travel Certificates representing the document Korean adopted children carry to their new countries, Jane Jeong Trenka

all of its children. “Korea does not have any more war orphans and...has the economic strength and social vitality to provide support and services to families, including single parent households”. The National Human Rights Commission of Korea has recommended the South Korean government to sign the Hague Convention and give its full compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has expressed concern about Korea's inter-country adoption program.

The art exhibition, designed by Leanne Leith, Korean adoptee and founder of the Facebook group KAFRA, Korean Adoptees for Fair Records Access, and planned by Leith and Trenka, spanned the length of the atrium until June 15th. The idea for this was borne after TRACK's May 10th press conference on the revision law bill when Rep. Choi asked the organization to stage a performance for their cause. Instead of a performance, TRACK preferred an art exhibition with a display of 200,000 dolls. Due to budget constraints, they rested instead on miniature-sized paper representations of the travel certificates children adopted abroad carried with them on the plane to their new countries.

Trenka and Leith hope that lawmakers who walked through the tunnel were moved by what they saw: overlapping columns of the travel certificates interspersed with the photos. Trenka and Leith chose to name the tunnel, “The Hall of Shame”, to epitomize the general feeling many Koreans have regarding international adoption. Both feel Koreans can turn that shame into something productive. “I want to challenge

[the Korean government] to take action...to do the right thing and in a timely manner,” says Trenka.

Leith, when asked about what she would say to the National Assembly if she could, responded with the following:

“Penalizing only women for indiscretions or unfortunate circumstances not only hurts the women, their children, and society, but it also hurts Korea, in both potential citizen numbers and emotional trauma to society at large.

“These women are no disgrace to Korea: Korea's neglect of them is the real disgrace, and the resulting expulsion of children abroad makes Korea look like a third world charity case. These women who choose to face their mistakes and bear their responsibilities indicate a true strength of character and maturity that is missing from the claims of many Koreans. Any woman who chooses to prevail in such a harsh and critical climate as Korea's, to care for the flesh and blood she brought into the world, deserves our support.

“So instead of penalizing these women, we need to assist them. It is an investment in a stronger Korea, as every child lost to lack of social services equals a loss of human potential, and the kind of potential that comes from difficult beginnings forges the strongest character, which Korea has lost almost 200,000 times now. Let this congressional session show the world that Koreans are...enlightened people creating a civilized society that takes care of its own citizens.”

By Katherine Ann Solim Sirgey