

Chapter 7

Mother America: Cold War Maternalism and the Origins of Korean Adoption

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ABSTRACT

After the Korean War, it became acceptable and expected that American families would adopt Korean children into their homes, symbolizing American prosperity and security. As significant a role as social work played in this process, there currently exists no research that examines the activities of the profession and the origins of Korean adoption. This chapter discusses the maternalist nature of adoption efforts during the 1950s by one international social welfare agency after the Korean War: the American Branch of International Social Service (ISS-USA). Predicated on maternalist ideologies that shaped the social work profession during the Progressive Era, in what the author calls Cold War maternalism, the gendered notions of motherhood were expanded to genderless notions of parenthood. Anticommunist sentiments thrust adoptive parenthood into the political spotlight on an international level, thus serving the best interests of adoptive parents and the nation long before serving those of the children.

INTRODUCTION

In 1953, an armistice temporarily suspended the Korean War, a three-year civil war between what is now the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) (Cumings, 2010). Those left behind in

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the aftermath of the war included hundreds of thousands of widows and children (Korean Institute of Military History, 2001). According to the Ministry of Social Affairs (ca. 1956), “The number of children’s institutions is three times as many and the number of children in the institutions is four times as many as before the war” (p. 2). Many of the children in desperate need of help were mixed-blood children—those born of Korean mothers, primarily fathered by American servicemen. Given their urgent situation, many Americans, including professional social workers, began devising safe and expeditious methods of child removal, thereby institutionalizing intercountry adoption.

Using historical research methods situated within a maternalist framework, this chapter provides a critical analysis of social-work child-rescue efforts in postwar South Korea during the 1950s, as embodied by one international social welfare agency: the American Branch of International Social Service (ISS-USA). This social work organization established and institutionalized intercountry adoption practices in the aftermath of the Korean War, in response to the plight of mixed-blood Korean children orphaned by the war. It was the premier expert on intercountry adoption of foreign children to the United States during the 1950s.

BACKGROUND

Described as a “hermit nation,” (Dr. Bob Pierce, as cited in Wagner, 1956), Korea was a “poor and primitive country” with towns that were “sordid and dirty,” and homes that were “hovel-like” (Wagner, 1956, p. 1). Agencies attempting to help the children left abandoned or deserted after the war had to deal with a complete lack of social welfare. As Far East Representative Florence Boester (1957) reported, there was “inadequacy of feeding, housing, and medical facilities; lack of trained leadership; maddening difficulties in the means of communication and travel; absence of coordinated social resources” (p. 4). The families of the birth mothers of mixed-blood Korean children had deserted them. According to Valk (1956), “Missionaries who work up near the 38th parallel where there are stationed many foreign servicemen describe the woods being full of girls with such children” (p. 3). The children were described as animal-like. They were “dirty, untrained, and not properly fed” (Pettiss, 1955c, p. 1). American assistance was desperately needed.

After the war, virtually no social welfare structure at any level existed in Korea (International Social Service Korea Project, n.d.) . There were “not even half a dozen fully trained Korean social workers in the country,” as social work had not been established as a profession (Boester, 1957b, p. 4). Until its connection with ISS-USA in 1954, Child Placement Service (CPS) had been the only government-

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