

After complaints, South Korea admits that it mishandled adoptions

Warm-up question: Have you ever discovered new information about your past or your family that changed the way you see things? How did it affect you?

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A MARTÍNEZ, HOST:

Ever since the Korean War ended in 1953, South Korea has been one of the top countries that sends babies abroad for adoption. And this week, for the first time, the South Korean government admitted that concern for those babies' welfare was not **the driving force** for so many adoptions. NPR's Se Eun Gong reports from Seoul.

SE EUN GONG, BYLINE: Minnesota resident Ami Nafzger once had a version of her origin story. She was adopted from South Korea to an American home at age 4, and her Korean name is Jin Inja. But when she returned to South Korea to search for her birth parents, her story began to fall apart. She says the **orphanage** she went back to...

AMI NAFZGER: They showed me this baby picture, and they're like, oh, this is you, and this is what happened. And I'm like, well, that's not me.

GONG: After six visits, the orphanage finally admitted that it had switched her files.

NAFZGER: So I have this piece of paper where they gave me a list of, like, six names. You could be this person, this person, this person, this person.

GONG: Nafzger's experience is **echoed** in searches for biological families by many adopted from South Korea. According to official data, nearly 170,000 children were adopted from South Korea since 1955, although the actual number might be higher. Sixty-five percent of them went to the United States. More than 1 out of 100 babies were sent to a foreign country during the peak years for adoption in the 1970s and '80s. That generation of adoptees started returning to South Korea a couple decades ago, looking to find their **roots**. But what they often find are falsified and obscured records that lead to nowhere. Three years ago, hundreds of adoptees petitioned for an investigation. And this week, a government agency admitted that the South Korean government and adoption agencies violated adoptees' rights by sending more children faster.

BETHANY LONG NEWMAN: It was a relief that it was **mirroring** what many adoptees had been saying for years.

GONG: Bethany Long Newman is a Chicago resident who was adopted when she was 6 months old. She has felt frustrated by the lack of information about her origin. According to South Korea's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, adoption firms registered babies as **orphans** - when they weren't - to make it easier to place them for adoption. In some cases, when a baby died before an adoption was completed, a different baby was sent away in its name, but adoption firms still collected fees and donations. The government **turned a blind eye to** the agency's wrongdoings, the commission said, because adoption was easier than strengthening social welfare. The commission called on the government to apologize to the victims and come up with **remedies**.

NEWMAN: The least that you can do is give someone access to all the information that is rightfully theirs.

GONG: As a first step, Newman wants to see her complete file with nothing hidden or **redacted**.

Se Eun Gong, NPR News, Seoul.

Vocabulary and Phrases:

1. **Driving force:** The main reason or motivation behind an action or development.
2. **Orphanage:** A residential institution where children without parents are cared for.
3. **Echoed:** Repeated or reflected; when someone else's experience or statement is similar to your own.
4. **Roots:** A person's family origins or cultural background.
5. **Mirroring:** Reflecting or showing the same qualities, ideas, or opinions.
6. **Orphans:** Children whose parents have died or are no longer able to care for them.
7. **Turn a blind eye to (something):** To ignore or pretend not to notice something bad or wrong.
8. **Remedy:** A solution or action taken to fix a problem or wrong.
9. **Redacted:** Edited or blacked out (especially in official documents) to hide sensitive or confidential information.

Comprehension Questions:

1. What did the South Korean government recently admit regarding international adoptions?
2. Why did Ami Nafzger begin to doubt the story of her adoption?
3. What challenges do many adoptees face when searching for their birth families?
4. What did the Truth and Reconciliation Commission find adoption agencies had done?
5. Why did the government turn a blind eye to the misconduct of adoption agencies?
6. What does Bethany Long Newman hope to gain as a first step toward justice?

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you think adopted individuals have a right to full access to their records? Why or why not?
2. What responsibility do governments have when past practices are found to have caused harm?
3. How should countries balance the need to care for children with the need to respect their identities and origins?
4. Have you ever had to question something you once believed about your own life or identity?