

# CSUF researcher examines “invisible” Korean War adoptees

By **CONTRIBUTING WRITER** |  
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[RIGHT]: Susie Woo, a Korean CSUF researcher, wrote a letter to a Korean orphan, now in his 70s, asking for an interview. His wife found her letter in the trash, but called Woo thanking her for her interest. She told the researcher it was too painful for her husband to remember that time. She holds a 1954 Korean choir image of orphanages photographed at the Statue of Liberty. Photographed at her Fullerton office on Thurs., Aug. 17. (Photo by Cindy Yamanaka, Orange County Register/SCNG)

By Jeong Park

Many photos of Korean War adoptees obscure reality.

In one photo, the smiling adoptees are depicted singing in their colorful traditional Korean dress known as *hanbok*.

Those children, a part of the Korean Orphan Choir, would perform at Carnegie Hall and produce an album with a folk singer Burl Ives, also known for movies roles such as Sam the Snowman in “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.”

“They were the first K-Pop group,” said Susie Woo, a Cal State Fullerton American studies professor. “(But) their day-to-day life was very different than what the photographs captured.”

Woo is trying to capture this disparity for a book she is writing. She is researching the experience of Korean War adoptees and military brides, many of whom she said experienced the harsh reality of the United States.

Woo said many of the military brides, who came to the United States after marrying American servicemen, immediately faced racial discrimination because of anti-



miscegenation bias. But she said many adoptees — ostensibly celebrated by Americans — suffered trauma of their own.

“Korean women and children became central to creating a racially tolerant image of the U.S.,” Woo said. “But the reality was much more fraught.”

The Korean War is often called “The Forgotten War.” But it fundamentally changed the lives of millions in Korea and the United States.

More than four million soldiers and civilians were killed or wounded from 1950 to 1953 — including more than 36,000 U.S. soldiers who died.

The war also left behind tens of thousands of adoptees, many of them the children of American servicemen and Korean civilians. Many of the children were housed in orphanages and adopted overseas.

“The Korean War is a forgotten war, but they are very visible,” said Leila Zenderland, the chair of CSUF’s American Studies department.

In June, Woo received a \$17,500 grant from the Nancy Weiss Malkiel Scholars Awards Program, which called her research as “thoughtful, insightful, timely, much-needed scholarship.” But her research began well before then.

While in college, she recalled hearing stories of her parents, who lived in South Korea during the Korean War.

“The war transformed both of their lives,” Woo said. “I wanted to write a social history and think about what happened to Korean civilians and America citizens who experienced the war.”

While a graduate student at Yale, Woo thought of her research as an oral history project of the voices of Korean War adoptees. She sent a couple of the adoptees a letter to gauge their interest.

Then, she got a call from the adoptee’s wife.

“I found a really nice letter, and I found it in the trash,” Woo recalled the wife’s words.

Woo said she then had realized the trauma many of the adoptees have had about their experience. She shifted focus, traveling to South Korea in 2005. There, she visited orphanages built during the ’50s and the ’60s and examined the orphanages’ historical documents.

Much of the records were lost through natural disasters, but Woo was able to look at photos of some of the adoptees as they entered the orphanages for the first time.

“They had just finished crying,” Woo said. “Those photos reveal the trauma that you never had an opportunity to see in the U.S. side.”

Both the South Korean and the U.S. government were eager to promote the children, whose images conveyed South Korea’s resilience and the U.S.’s commitment to Korea.

The American government wanted to use the children to justify the Korean War and the American presence in South Korea, Woo said.

“Children were viewed as apolitical, but of course, they aren’t,” Woo said. “Images of the Korean children were a way for the U.S. to recoup the losses of the war.”

But for the adoptees, their stories were typically what Woo called “full of trauma and loss.”

They usually lost virtually all contacts with the Korean culture and their birth parents. They were often the only Asian person in their community.

“Some of them recalled if they pleased their (adoptive) parents, they can be sent back to Korea (as a reward),” Woo said. “They felt like they were forced to lose the Korean culture and never address the deep loss.”

Racial segregation further complicated the matter — many families had to relocate after finding out that their adopted children were half-Korean and half-black.

The segregation also affected how many Koreans in South Korea view race, Woo said.

She pointed to the orphanages’ records, which included a checkbox to indicate a child’s skin tone.

“That had an implication for Korean understanding of the value that is placed on whiteness and blackness,” Woo said.

Woo said those adoptees and orphanages also paved the way for Western-style child care system in South Korea.

“To extricate yourself from the Western system of care was very difficult,” Woo said.

Amid all of those conflicts and struggles, many adoptees found their footing. They have organized [groups](#) and produced artworks and stories documenting their experiences. Woo said she often refers to those works for help.

Woo said she hopes her book will help raise further awareness about the population.

“(The book) tries to make those children central,” she said.