

The Question of Adoption: “Divided” Korea, “Neutral” Sweden, and Cold War Geopolitics, 1964–75

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This article examines the early development of South Korean intercountry adoption to Sweden. It focuses particularly on two disruptions in the movement of children between the two nations, drawing on archival sources in Sweden, South Korea, and Denmark. The article demonstrates that South Korean–Swedish adoption was deeply bound up in the shifting Cold War relations within and between the Korean peninsula and Scandinavia in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Further, state actions and strategies during this time reveal that both governments actively utilized their Cold War foreign policy and positionality to shape adoption to meet their respective national interests. This study extends US-centered adoption scholarship by revealing broader implications of Cold War geopolitics in cross-border adoptions to Scandinavia and, more importantly, significant ways in which intercountry adoption challenged, altered, and constituted the Cold War relations and nation-building projects of both sending and receiving states.

Keywords: children in need, Cold War, geopolitics, international adoption, Korea, Sweden, United Nations, welfare state

IN EARLY OCTOBER 1975, South Korean newspapers extensively covered the case of a four-year-old boy called Kim T'ak-un, who had been adopted by a family in Sweden a year earlier (*Dong-a Ilbo* 1975; *Korea Times* 1975). Found on the street of Daegu in June 1974, T'ak-un was considered an abandoned child and referred by the local police to an adoption agency, the Social Welfare Society. The agency began arranging an overseas adoption for him, and five months later, he was sent to Sweden to join his new adoptive family.¹ T'ak-un's adoption could have been what anthropologist Barbara Yngvesson (2003, 7) calls a typical “story of abandonment,” but it later turned out that T'ak-un had, in fact, been lost. T'ak-un was living with his aunt when he went missing, and his single father, who eked out a living as a daily laborer, moved around from place to place for work. When he learned of T'ak-un's disappearance, the father searched high and low for T'ak-un and eventually found out about his adoption in the early months of 1975. The father asked the agency to return his son to him, and when his request was turned down, he made the case public (RA 1975a).

The Swedish media also widely reported T'ak-un's story. In Sweden, the focus was particularly on its potential repercussions for the adoption program from South Korea

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¹This article uses the terms “international” or “intercountry” adoption interchangeably, following the dominant conventions of the international adoption profession, but the former appears most commonly in the Swedish archival materials. When highlighting the South Korean perspective, it uses “overseas adoption” (*haeoe ibyang*), the most widely used term in South Korea, emphasizing the outward movement of children.

as a whole, which had been disrupted for nearly a year. In December 1974, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs of the Republic of Korea (ROK) suspended adoption to Scandinavia, and the Swedish authorities had been negotiating with the ROK government to normalize adoption.² When this story emerged, the Swedish authorities strongly questioned its credibility. In an interview with the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, Birgitta Thunström of Socialstyrelsen (the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare), who was in charge of the South Korean adoption program in Sweden, argued that “with 99 percent certainty, the entire story is wrong,” referring to the legal procedure in South Korea that required all “found” children to be advertised prior to adoption (Gunnarsson 1975).³ The Swedish government was primarily concerned that the case might “complicate our dealings with the South Koreans in adoption” and tried to minimize its publicity (RA 1975b).⁴

Meanwhile, in South Korea, media coverage evoked public sympathy for the father, and the International Human Rights League of Korea became involved in attempting to bring T’ak-un back. The ROK government also requested T’ak-un’s return initially (RA 1975a). However, the Swedish authorities did not agree, and Swedish consul general Lars Berg in Seoul asserted that it was in “the best interests” of T’ak-un “to stay with the Swedish adoptive parents and not to be sent back to an uncertain fate of the father without work and residence” (RA 1975c, 1975d).⁵ After a week of investigation, the ROK government also concluded that it was better for T’ak-un to stay in Sweden, questioning the father’s ability to provide for him. With the media’s dwindling interest, T’ak-un never returned, and the ROK government quietly reopened adoption to Scandinavia (NAK 1975).

For those familiar with South Korean international adoption, T’ak-un’s story is not exceptional, but it was one of the first widely publicized adoption cases in which a missing child was sent overseas. It was also distinctive in that the media coverage developed into an international campaign to bring T’ak-un back. How can we understand the Swedish authorities’ seemingly blunt reaction to T’ak-un’s story and requests for his return? Equally, why did the ROK government give up its demand so readily and resume adoption to Sweden amid the controversy? In answering these questions, this article examines the development of South Korean–Swedish adoption between 1964 and 1975, drawing on state and institutional records from Sweden, South Korea, and Denmark. It particularly focuses on two disruptions in the adoption program and analyzes the roles and actions of both states through the lens of their respective national and Cold War geopolitical interests.

The vast scholarship on the Cold War on the Korean peninsula shows the intimate connections between Soviet-American rivalry and the division of Korea, and subsequent development between and within the ROK and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). Much of this work focuses on the realms of politics, security, and

²When referring to the states, this article uses the terms “Republic of Korea” (ROK) and “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea” (DPRK). Otherwise, “South Korea” and “North Korea” are used.

³Translated from Swedish. All translations are my own. While the South Korean Extra-Ordinary Orphan Adoption Law of 1961 required children going overseas for adoption to be advertised in district courts and newspapers, this was not strictly enforced.

⁴Translated from Swedish.

⁵Translated from Swedish.

economy to explore the ways in which aggressive and competitive nation-building projects of the ROK and the DPRK were shaped and facilitated by the dualistic alliances that emerged on the peninsula: the ROK with the United States and Japan, and the DPRK with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China.⁶ Yet pathbreaking studies on the early history of South Korean intercountry adoption have revealed that cross-border placements of children, seemingly private and humanitarian, were also deeply implicated in Cold War geopolitics (see, e.g., Choy 2013; Kim 2010; Klein 2003; Oh 2015; Pate 2014). Intercountry adoption first expanded in South Korea in the aftermath of the Korean War as a result of the so-called issue of mixed-race children, born mostly to local women by American soldiers stationed there.⁷ Seen as living symbols of the *de facto* neocolonial relationship between the United States and South Korea, mixed Korean children posed political concerns to both states, as they feared that the communist regimes might use these children as a political tool to discredit them. State and nonstate actors in the United States and South Korea eagerly participated in placing these children into American homes. Scholars such as Christina Klein (2003), Eleana Kim (2010), and Arissa Oh (2015) have shown that South Korean adoption emerged out of this particular Cold War context, and child placements were facilitated as a form of intimate, people-to-people diplomacy to strengthen the Cold War alliance between the United States and South Korea.

Despite declining numbers of mixed-race children available for adoption in the 1960s, South Korean intercountry adoption did not end. Instead, its primary focus shifted to full-Korean children, and the practice experienced an unprecedented expansion in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Significant to this transition was the involvement of European countries in South Korean adoption. A limited number of studies have explored what intercountry adoption after the postwar period meant to the new adoptive nations as well as to South Korea.⁸ In Europe, Sweden was the first to draw up an adoption partnership with South Korea in 1966, and the adoption program expanded in the following years. However, the uninterrupted movement of children soon came to an end as the ROK government twice suspended adoption: in December 1970, when it discontinued adoptions to six European countries, including Sweden, and in late 1974, when it discontinued adoptions to the three Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Denmark, and Norway).

The late 1960s and early 1970s were also a critical period in the global history of the Cold War. The easing of East-West tensions in Europe and the United States entering greater dialogue with the Soviet Union opened up a new phase in the Cold War known as *détente*; it also brought new challenges and possibilities to the Korean

⁶The literature on Cold War Korea is extensive. Some examples include Cumings (2010) on the Korean War, Moon (1997) on US-ROK relations through military prostitution, and Brazinsky (2007) on South Korea's nation-building during the Cold War.

⁷This article uses the terms "mixed Korean children" and "mixed-race children" to refer to children with mixed parentage. When referring to children of full-Korean parentage, the article uses the term "full-Korean children" but recognizes that people can be culturally fully Korean without being biologically Korean. "South Korean children" is used to denote children who originated geographically from South Korea.

⁸It is important to acknowledge the pioneering work by Hübinette (2003, 2017), Lindgren (2010), and Yngvesson (2010) on international adoption in Sweden and by Myong and Andersen (2015) on the Danish context.

peninsula. New international relations that crossed the conventional Cold War divide, such as those between the Soviet Union and the ROK, Eastern Europe and the ROK, the United States and the DPRK, and Northern Europe and the DPRK, were explored, while the ROK and the DPRK began a dialogue in 1971 for the first time since the national division. These relationships, in addition to existing alliances, became critical in understanding Cold War Korea (Hong 2012).

As this study will show, South Korean intercountry adoption to Sweden stood at the very intersection of the turbulent relationship between the two Koreas and European détente. The adoption suspensions were taken to be a direct result of the complex geopolitical relationships that Sweden forged with the DPRK on the one hand, and the ROK on the other. In other words, in the early 1970s, Sweden, typically deemed “peripheral” to the Cold War for its neutrality, became a critical ideological battleground between the ROK and the DPRK, and the tensions between the two Koreas played out through children adopted from South Korea. Further, close examination of the actions taken by the Swedish and ROK governments during the adoption suspensions reveals that both authorities actively mobilized their foreign policies and unique Cold War positionalities—South Korea as a divided nation and Sweden as a neutral country, particularly in terms of its role in the United Nations—to shape the adoption program, which was intimately bound up with both states’ nation-building projects, both symbolically and concretely.

The case of South Korean–Swedish adoption, therefore, significantly extends the current understanding of the relationship between the Cold War and intercountry adoption as the former conditioning and shaping the latter, as seen in the postwar adoption of mixed Korean children to the United States. Instead, it shows that while South Korean intercountry adoption in the 1960s and 1970s was continuously affected by the Cold War geopolitics of the Korean peninsula, it also directly activated formal diplomacy between South Korea and Sweden and altered and shaped Cold War interstate relations. This little-explored history demonstrates interactive processes through which child adoption, states’ nation-building projects, and Cold War geopolitics co-constituted one another. It points to the need to explore more dynamic roles that seemingly nonpolitical issues such as child adoption might have played not just as a means of consolidating the binary Cold War order pursued by states, but also in unsettling the divide and shifting global Cold War politics.

This article is divided into two main sections. The first shows how the adoption partnership between South Korea and Sweden was developed and what role South Korean adoption played in the two nations. The remainder of the article examines the two adoption suspensions and teases out strategies and measures taken by the ROK and Swedish governments. The conclusion returns to T’ak-un’s story and discusses the significance of South Korean adoption.

“KOREAN ORPHANS” TO AN “IDEAL COUNTRY”

I am very happy that our Child Placement Service is to form relations with Kungliga Socialstyrelsen in order to send Korean orphans to adoptive parents in Sweden which was envied by Korean people as an ideal country.⁹ (RA 1965a)

⁹Grammatical errors are preserved to retain the original tone of the text.

This quotation is an excerpt from an August 1965 letter written by Tahk Youn Taek, the newly appointed director of the Child Placement Service (CPS, now the Social Welfare Society) in South Korea, when he was notified that his organization had been chosen as the partner of the Swedish state agency Socialstyrelsen to arrange child placements from South Korea to Sweden. The following spring, a group of Swedish government officials, including Social Democratic parliamentarian Mary Holmqvist, traveled to Seoul to further discuss the possibility of formalizing the partnership, and in November 1966, Socialstyrelsen and the CPS signed an adoption agreement (SOU 1967, 39; Tahk, personal communication). A handful of South Korean children had moved to Sweden for adoption through the connections forged as a result of the Swedish involvement in the Korean War, but the partnership marked a turning point, as the number of adoptions between the two countries increased drastically beginning in the mid-1960s (SOU 1967, 21–23).

The adoption agreement was in fact part of a larger project that the Swedish government was carrying out at the time. In October 1964, the Swedish Council of State launched an ambitious three-year state investigation of international adoption (hereafter “the Investigation”) in response to the rising number of foreign children arriving in Sweden for adoption (SOU 1967, 7). In the first half of the twentieth century, following the introduction of a series of family welfare policies, Sweden experienced a rapid decrease in the number of children in need of new homes domestically (Yngvesson 2010, 26). On the other hand, growing infertility and the renewed significance of parenthood as a measure of self-fulfillment and social respectability during the postwar economic expansion pushed an increasing number of Swedes to look overseas for children (Howell 2007, 65–66). Adding to this was the global circulation of images of “orphans” in the Third World,¹⁰ which gave some Swedes a strong motivation to “rescue” such children (Hübinette 2003, 254). Yet, despite growing interest, international adoption was a relatively new phenomenon in Sweden, and the lack of clarity on relevant procedures was frequently quoted in the media as a source of frustration among Swedes wishing to adopt children from abroad. Many of them went on to submit petitions to relevant authorities, such as Socialstyrelsen and the Swedish Foreign Ministry, for assistance (SOU 1967, 7, 15). In parallel, the arrival of foreign children, who looked markedly different from the majority of white Swedes, sparked heated public debate on the prospects of these children in a society that was imagined to be racially homogenous (SOU 1967, 21–30).

The Investigation was a state response to this development. Bringing the Ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs and Socialstyrelsen together, it carried out a thorough examination of the adjustment of transracial adoptees and relevant regulations in order to develop coherent guidelines. Further, the Investigation conducted an impressive

¹⁰Critical adoption studies scholars have revealed the global inequalities that enable and sustain the circulation of children from poor to wealthy nations (e.g., Briggs 2012; Kim 2010; Yngvesson 2010). In particular, they critique the popular notion of the “orphan,” as it tends to obscure the structural violence that creates needy children, and instead turns them into ahistorical victims to be saved through international adoption. Except for direct quotations, this article uses “orphan” in quotation marks to highlight its depoliticizing effect and to recognize the inaccuracy of the term, as most children adopted from South Korea had living parents.

survey of potential sending societies, covering more than twenty nations, including Greece, South Korea, India, and Ethiopia. This survey makes international adoption in Sweden distinctive, as state investigators did not simply collect information about adoption legislation and social conditions in the relevant countries, but also actively sought to establish adoption channels. During the Investigation, they succeeded in securing adoption partnerships with two countries: Greece and South Korea.¹¹

Many Western societies at the time, such as the United States and France, experienced similar social conditions that led to a burgeoning interest in international adoption, but each state responded to the need of its citizens differently. In Sweden, the role of the state was pivotal from the very outset. This can be attributed to its welfare state, particularly the Scandinavian model based on the principle of universalism. During their long tenure between 1932 and 1976, the Swedish Social Democrats successfully forged a political consensus on the expansion of public expenditure and incorporated all social strata under one state welfare system (Einhorn and Logue 2003, 150; Esping-Andersen 1990, 27–31).

With the aim of achieving “equality of the highest standards, not an equality of minimal needs,” the Swedish welfare state was determined to provide most comprehensive public-sector schemes to *all* citizens (Esping-Andersen 1990, 27). Under the universalist model, some benefits acquired the status of civic rights. Parenthood was increasingly seen as such: having a child was seen as a right that Swedish citizens could demand of the state. This was made possible by the strong pronatalist family policy introduced from the 1930s (Hessle and Vinnerljung 1999, 3–4). Concerned about record low fertility rates during the economic recession, the Swedish state began to be deeply involved in the realms of reproduction and domestic space, to encourage Swedish people to have more children and shape them into modern subjects (Freiburg 1993, 227–28; Hübinette 2017). The aforementioned direct petitions to the authorities by Swedes who wanted to adopt foreign children stem from this historical experience of state intervention and reflect a view of parenthood as social citizenship. Their demands included state-level guidance, administrative support, and public subsidies for international adoption (RA 1972).

The Investigation attended to these demands and drew on the cooperation of authorities at different levels. In the case of South Korea, one of the first tasks was to identify intermediary organizations to liaise with; Swedish ambassador Karl Fredrik Almqvist was tasked with searching for potential partners in early 1965. Subsequently, contact with three agencies was established: CPS, the Seoul Sanitarium and Hospital Orphanage, and the South Korean International Social Service, which all had previous experience in arranging adoptions to Sweden. The Investigation eventually chose CPS as its sole partner, for its unique position in South Korean child welfare (RA 1965b). CPS was the first adoption agency set up in South Korea in 1954 following the instructions of President Syngman Rhee to place mixed Korean children in American homes. After the military coup in 1961, the agency underwent a major transformation, as the military

¹¹The Investigation secured its first agreement with an orphanage (Metera) in Athens, but the Greek government passed new adoption legislation in 1966 that severely limited adoptions of Greek children by foreign nationals. Adoption between the two countries did not develop on a large scale.

government decided to use CPS for its first domestic child welfare project and brought it under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs (MHSA) (Social Welfare Society 2004, 46).

Given their limited experience in international adoption, the Swedish authorities valued CPS's semigovernmental status and believed that it would better guarantee the soundness of the practice and help them gain more insight into the South Korean situation (RA 1965c). In November 1966, the adoption agreement between CPS and Socialstyrelsen was finalized. Notably, the Swedish state agency Socialstyrelsen was appointed as the Swedish intermediary. This meant that the state was not only responsible for overseeing the practice, but also tasked with making actual adoption arrangements. Furthermore, the agreement mandated that all Swedish citizens wishing to adopt children from South Korea contact Socialstyrelsen and that CPS place children for Swedish citizens only when their applications came from Socialstyrelsen (SOU 1967, 106–8). As a result, a single adoption channel between the two countries was established.¹²

The Swedish state considered itself responsible for helping Swedish citizens become parents and used intercountry adoption as a means of achieving this. This is succinctly described in the report of the Investigation:

These [Swedish] authorities should be instructed to assist those wishing to adopt foreign children [. . .] so that anyone who has the potential to receive a foreign child has the same opportunities, regardless of language skills, etc.¹³ (SOU 1967, 15)

While state involvement in the actual delivery of children from abroad is a uniquely Swedish phenomenon, scholarship on the relationship between adoption and modern government helps contextualize the Swedish trajectory. During the twentieth century, child adoption in many Western societies underwent turbulent processes of professionalization and rationalization and subsequently brought the private issues of reproduction and kinship under increasing public scrutiny (Balcom 2011; Herman 2009). Analyzing the development in the United States, historian Ellen Herman (2009, 11) argues that adoption modernization contributed to the expansion of the welfare state and, more broadly, “therapeutic government” that managed populations through “help” rather than punishment. Seen in this light, it might be seen more as exemplary, rather than exceptional, that the Swedish state, founded ambitiously on the universalist vision, strove to create a single state adoption channel so as to guarantee equal access to parenthood for all Swedish citizens and consolidate its identity as a welfare state.¹⁴

The creation of the adoption partnership between Sweden and South Korea was rather uncomplicated because the Swedish government took the lead, and also because

¹²In 1980, the state's role changed to that of supervision, and a private agency, Adoptionscentrum, became an intermediary for the South Korean program; however, the single channel between the two countries has been maintained to this today.

¹³Translated from Swedish.

¹⁴Not all authorities and organizations in Sweden, however, agreed on the extensive state involvement in international adoption, with some questioning the viability of such a solution (SOU 1967, 16–17). The Investigation's primary focus on so-called Third World nations can be understood in this context, as it was believed that this would emphasize the humanitarian image of international adoption.

attitudes in South Korea were receptive. After a meeting with the MHSA, Swedish ambassador Almqvist described the positive response from the ROK government:

The Ministry [officials] have stated that they take a favorable position on the adoption of South Korean children, especially, “mixed-blood children,” provided that the adopter(s) are resident of a *friendly country* which is well-known to South Korea.¹⁵ (RA 1965b; emphasis added)

This attitude was echoed in the letter from Tahk of CPS, who expressed eagerness to participate in the Swedish partnership. Similar to the “American dream,” identified as an important underlying factor in the expansion of South Korean adoption to the United States, South Korea’s perception of Sweden as “an ideal country” with an extensive welfare system might have assisted here (Kim 2016).

Yet, what critically shaped the attitudes of relevant officials was the issue of “children in orphanages” (*sisöl adong*) in South Korea. In the early 1960s, more than fifty thousand children, most of whom were full Korean, were cared for in some five hundred orphanages. The continuous expansion in the number of institutionalized children long after the war deeply troubled government officials and child welfare practitioners (KAVA 1965). Shortly after the coup in 1961, as part of broader social reform, the military junta launched a nationwide child welfare project to deinstitutionalize children through domestic adoption, foster care, and home relief, and it tasked CPS with carrying out the project (NAK 1962, 69–70). However, the justification for the coup, as well as the ultimate vision of the Park Chung Hee regime, lay in building a modern, anticommunist nation, and economic advancement was placed at the center of the state’s ambitions (Lie 2000, 45–46). Overall, child welfare was a low priority for the government, and with a limited budget and authority given for the project, CPS could not bring about the desired change.

Instead, 1960s South Korea saw record numbers of children found on the streets—on average, 6,400 children annually (MHSA 1970). A comprehensive account of this highly complex phenomenon of child abandonment is beyond the scope of this article. In brief, child abandonment was affected by a variety of factors: rapid urbanization and related issues such as inadequate housing, lack of secure jobs, and severance of familial and social ties; the limitations of the welfare system and meager social spending; and the relative material wealth of orphanages as a result of Western voluntary agencies’ concentrated financial support (Lee 1964). Lacking measures to prevent family breakdown and alternatives to institutionalization, the high number of children in orphanages was a constant and central child welfare concern. With the difficulties of delivering the deinstitutionalization project, CPS went through leadership turmoil, and in 1965, in the hope of revitalizing the only semigovernmental child welfare agency, the MHSA appointed Tahk as director of CPS. He then actively took on several initiatives, including the Swedish adoption partnership (Tahk, personal communication).

During the 1960s, however, the ROK government still saw intercountry adoption primarily as a way of addressing the issue of mixed Korean children. This view is clear in the

¹⁵Translated from Swedish.

foregoing statement from the MHSA, which explained that it took a particularly “favorable position” on overseas adoption of “mixed-blood children.” This attitude to both intercountry adoption and mixed-race children was not particular to South Korea; it was also seen in other occupied nations such as West Germany and Japan after World War II. However, the Park administration never officially endorsed overseas adoption of full-Korean children, as it could be seen as a sign of state failing to provide for its “people.” Yet, because of the colossal domestic child welfare problem and its limited social spending, the ROK government did not discourage cross-border placements of full-Korean children and tacitly accepted and enabled the expansion of the practice. For instance, the MHSA authorized adoption agencies to serve as official reception centers where children found on the streets could be sent directly, as seen in the case of Tak-un in the introduction. It swiftly granted emigration permission, a prerequisite for a child’s departure for overseas adoption, to all children regardless of their racial background (NAK 1969; Yi 1977, 96–97).

The Swedish welfare state, faced with the decreasing availability of and increasing demand for adoptable children, went outside its borders to deliver its family welfare policy. In South Korea, struggling to devise more permanent solutions to child welfare issues, the ROK authorities tacitly accepted intercountry adoption of full-Korean children to relieve mounting financial pressure (Sarri, Baik, and Bombyk 1998). In other words, adoptions between the two countries were enabled as a form of transnational biopolitics, as they helped both governments solve domestic population issues. The number of South Korean children moving to Sweden increased rapidly, from fewer than 30 in 1965 to 340 in 1970 (MHW 2017). Yet, as indicated by Ambassador Almquist, the ROK government accepted the practice insofar as the receiving nation was considered “friendly” to South Korea. Uninterrupted child migration to Sweden came to an end in the early 1970s. The next section examines how Cold War geopolitics came to the fore and complicated the adoption program between the two countries.

THE POLITICS OF ADOPTION IN COLD WAR KOREA AND SCANDINAVIA

In early December 1970, Socialstyrelsen received a puzzling letter from Tahk of CPS, informing it that the MHSA had not granted emigration permission to children planning to leave for Sweden and intended to stop adoptions to certain European countries, including Sweden (RA 1970a). After the CPS-Socialstyrelsen agreement, several other European countries drew up adoption partnerships with intermediaries in South Korea, contributing to the drastic expansion of South Korean intercountry adoption, from 451 in 1965 to 1,932 in 1970. Tahk explained that the measure was devised because of the activities of “North Korean agents” in Europe, who increasingly criticized South Korean adoption and attempted to instill hostile attitudes toward the South into adoptive families. Tahk said,

Perhaps your government and your people, taking a neutral line in this world divided into two hostile parties, may not realize our people’s feelings [. . .]. We had a bitter historical experience [of the Korean War] [. . .]. Still the puppet [DPRK] government has watched for a chance of armed encroachment

against [South] Korea [. . .]. It is only natural for our government and our people to get nervous on the puppet government political public information activity in Stockholm as their key position. (RA 1970a)

In the first half of the 1970s, the ROK government introduced two separate but inter-related adoption suspensions to selected European countries. As noted in Tahk's comment on Swedish neutrality, North Korean activities in Europe, and armed conflicts between the two Koreas, at the center of this unfolding was shifting Cold War geopolitics in Scandinavia and the Korean peninsula during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This section proceeds in two parts: the first traces how South Korean adoption to Scandinavia became problematic to the ROK government; the second analyzes the ways in which the ROK and Swedish governments used their foreign policies to shape the adoption program.

From "Ideal" to "Unfriendly"

About a week later, Tahk notified Socialstyrelsen that adoption had been suspended to six countries: Sweden, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Switzerland. Yet Tahk was hopeful, as he had learned from an "informal" conversation with the MHSA that the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) did not support the policy, so adoption was expected to resume shortly (RA 1970b). Nevertheless, the reaction of the Swedish authorities was one of confusion. Not only did the argument regarding North Korea sound bizarre, but the apparently conflicting opinions between the ministries also greatly puzzled them. To clarify the suspension and formulate a response, the Swedish Foreign Ministry urgently contacted the Swedish Embassy in Tokyo, as well as those in the affected countries, but the information gathered only made the picture more bewildering (RA 1971a). Some argued that the suspension was merely due to "administrative difficulties caused by delay" and "misunderstanding" within the MHSA (RA 1971b, 1971c).¹⁶ Others identified North Korean activities as the main trigger (RA 1971d). For instance, explaining the MHSA's naming of the six countries as "unfriendly," diplomat Lars-Olof Brilioth in the Hague referred to North Koreans' alleged attempts in these countries to approach adoptive parents and take their South Korean children to the North (RA 1971e).

Of the two very different causes (*political* North Korean criticism and *practical* difficulties), the Swedish authorities were unable to determine which had led to the suspension, but they were sure of one thing: "the facilitation of foreign adoption" to Sweden was "a government issue" (RA 1971f). Gunnar Heckscher, the Swedish ambassador to South Korea and a prominent political figure, was tasked with raising the adoption issue with the relevant authorities. During his visit to Seoul, Heckscher delivered the Swedish government's message to the MHSA and MFA, indicating a desire for adoption to continue (RA 1971g).¹⁷ Of the affected countries, only Sweden and the Netherlands responded officially, but regardless of the scale, the South Korean MFA was wary of its diplomatic impact on the relationship between South Korea and Europe. Hence, the ban was lifted shortly after in March 1971 (RA 1971h).

¹⁶Translated from Swedish.

¹⁷Heckscher was a prominent politician and diplomat, having served as the leader of the Moderate Party (Högerpartiet) and as ambassador to India prior to his appointment to Tokyo.

The first suspension had no numerical impact. However, for the Swedish authorities, the sudden policy change in Seoul highlighted the fragility of the adoption channel and their dependence on the willingness of the ROK government to participate in international adoption. As South Korea became the single largest country sending children to Sweden, it became a pressing issue for the Swedish authorities to convince the ROK government that the adoption program was for “mutual advantage” (RA 1971f).¹⁸

In June 1974, Socialstyrelsen sent its delegation to Seoul to discuss continuous cooperation. They met with high-level government officials, including Health and Social Affairs Minister Koh Jae Phil and Kim Young Ja, the head of the Bureau of Women and Child Affairs within the MHSA in charge of adoption-related issues (RA 1974a). A few months later, however, the media reported that the MHSA would introduce another adoption suspension, but this time only to Scandinavia: Sweden, Denmark, and Norway (Mattsson 1974). Swedish consul general Berg promptly looked into the case. Kim Young Ja confirmed the planned measure, referring to the increasing negative coverage of South Korean adoption in the Scandinavian media that corresponded to “the argument of North Korea,” such as an article headlined “Child Export in Secret from South Korea to Sweden” in the newspaper *Aftonbladet* (RA 1974b).¹⁹ Danish ambassador Tyge Dahlgaard also acted quickly and, from a conversation with Minister Koh, learned that the new adoption policy would require any Scandinavians wishing to adopt South Korean children to travel to Seoul for legal proceedings and child transportation. As prospective adoptive parents were expected to stay in Seoul for up to two months, Dahlgaard and Berg believed that this would, in practice, end South Korean adoption to Scandinavia (SA 1974).

The Swedish authorities noted a more serious aspect to the upcoming suspension compared with the previous suspension. Berg’s investigation revealed that President Park Chung Hee had instructed the policy introduction (RA 1974c). Further, behind this development were the ROK ambassadors in Scandinavia, who had raised concerns over adoption for some time. In a recent diplomatic tour by Choi Kyu-hah as a special presidential envoy to four Nordic countries in early November 1974, the ambassadors expressed their opinions directly to Choi, who delivered these messages to President Park (RA 1974d). Ambassador Nam Ch’öl to Norway put their concerns succinctly:

In Europe, only four Nordic countries currently have DPRK Embassies [. . .] and the North Koreans there are spreading vile propaganda messages that the ROK is incapable of caring for its own orphans and selling them. [. . .] it is perfectly natural for those who come across children adopted from South Korea to associate the country with poverty. [. . .] I am also deeply concerned about what kind of images of South Korea adopted children will develop.²⁰ (NAK 1974, 8)

The ROK authorities continuously made reference to North Korean criticism, particularly from North Koreans in Scandinavia. In his letter to Socialstyrelsen, quoted at the beginning of this section, Tahk gave notice of the anticipated first suspension and

¹⁸Translated from Swedish.

¹⁹Translated from Swedish.

²⁰Translated from Korean.

pointed out the ROK government's concern over Stockholm becoming North Korea's "key position." This referred to the fact that in the summer of 1970, the first Information Bureau of the DPRK in Northern Europe opened in Stockholm, Sweden, which had maintained a policy of neutrality since the nineteenth century, had begun pursuing a more active foreign policy in the 1960s by positioning itself as a mediator in international conflicts (Makko 2012, 95). Having already been involved in the Korean Armistice Agreement through its position on the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission, Sweden strove to maintain balanced relationships with both Koreas. In particular, in the late 1960s, East-West tensions in Europe were eased as a result of Western European leaders' growing skepticism about "the excesses of bipolarity"; the Nordic countries also collectively agreed to further their diplomatic endeavor to improve relationships with the Eastern bloc, including North Korea (Hanhimäki 2010, 198–204). Hence, it was far from surprising that the first DPRK bureau was established in Stockholm. From there, North Korean agents accused South Korea of exporting its children and used adopted children as evidence of South Korea's dismal situation (RA 1971i).²¹

The situation on the Korean peninsula was much more volatile. Military tensions between the two Koreas mounted as a result of numerous clashes along the Demilitarized Zone in the second half of the 1960s as well as the DPRK's attempt to assassinate President Park and the seizure of an American reconnaissance vessel in 1968 (Park 2009). The aforementioned development in the Nordic countries therefore deeply troubled the ROK government, as it feared that the Nordic region would function as a window for the DPRK to expand its influence into the heart of Western Europe (KDA 1974, 100–112). Thus, the Korean Central Intelligence Agency paid close attention to Stockholm in 1970, picked up information on North Korean propaganda regarding South Korean adoption, and relayed it to the MHS (NAK 1974, 63). The authorities in Seoul then selected six European countries for the first adoption suspension, based on their assessment that these countries were "influenced by communism" (SA 1971).

Yet, taking a dramatic turn in the early 1970s, the ROK and the DPRK governments initiated dialogue in 1971 for the first time since the national division and signed the July 4 South-North Joint Communiqué in 1972. Facilitated by this, all Nordic countries recognized and established full diplomatic relations with the DPRK in 1973, and DPRK embassies were set up there. However, inter-Korean dialogue did not lessen the competition and tension between the two Koreas, as both leaders used it as a means to consolidate their own authoritarian regimes (Hong 2012). Hence, the ROK government, concerned with the unfolding in the Nordic countries, hurriedly opened ROK embassies and appointed its first resident ambassadors (except in Sweden, where permanent representation already existed) to strengthen its presence in the region. Due to the context in which the ROK embassies were established, they were highly alert to any moves by the DPRK, including adoption-related criticism.

Hence, South Korean adoption to Scandinavia was positioned awkwardly, at the very intersection of European détente and turbulent inter-Korean relations in the early 1970s. Earlier, it was mentioned that the Park administration never officially endorsed overseas

²¹The DPRK as well as *Svensk-koreanska föreningen*, a Swedish friendship association with the DPRK, widely used radio broadcasts and print media to criticize South Korean adoption (NAK 1974, 39; Hübinette 2002–03).

adoption of full-Korean children, and this was closely linked to typical representations of intercountry adoption that tended to infantilize sending nations as economically and socially underdeveloped (Briggs 2012). The excess signification of South Korean children as symbols of poverty was also bluntly expressed by ROK ambassador Nam. For the Park regime that aggressively pursued modernization to justify its authoritarian rule and to prove the supremacy of the South Korean model over that of North Korea, these representations were an ongoing political concern, as they undermined the state ambitions and exposed the country's highly uneven development. Yet, struggling to effectively address vast issues of domestic child welfare described in the previous section, the ROK government accepted intercountry adoption insofar as its ramifications could be contained within the realm of social welfare. However, under the changing Cold War realities in Scandinavia and the intensifying competition between the two Koreas in the early 1970s, the political nature of South Korean intercountry adoption came to the fore. The ROK ambassadors argued that the adoption to Scandinavia posed a serious, concrete threat to their diplomatic undertaking against the DPRK and called for an immediate stop to it.

For 1970s South Korea, Sweden was no longer a “friendly,” “ideal” country but belonged on a list of “unfriendly” nations because of its ties with the DPRK. As Scandinavia became a problematic space for the ROK government, child adoption to the region, which challenged the ROK's stature and legitimacy as a state, also became an urgent security concern. This development was markedly different from postwar adoption between South Korea and the United States, which the Syngman Rhee administration considered the only “solution” to the Cold War concern of mixed Korean children. Further, President Rhee also sought to develop this biopolitical project into a diplomatic one that would strengthen South Korea's relationship with the United States (Kim 2010). On the contrary, the Park administration considered adoption to Scandinavia to offer an unfavorable image of South Korea which North Koreans there could capitalize on, thereby undermining its Cold War geopolitical interests in the region. Hence, the adoption suspensions were introduced in the name of national security interests.

The Question of Korea

During the two adoption suspensions, government officials, adoption intermediaries, and individuals in the affected nations made numerous requests to the ROK government for normalization. In response, the MHSA demanded the restriction of North Korean activities and mainstream media coverage of South Korean adoption, which the Swedish authorities considered beyond their remit (RA 1974e). When the second suspension became certain in late 1974, the Swedish authorities initially used the argument of discrimination for negotiation. They argued that the policy was unfair and discriminatory for it targeted some receiving countries, but not all (RA 1974c). Yet, the Swedish government officials recognized the explicit link between the target countries and their diplomatic relations with the DPRK, leading them to despair that “no result can be achieved because we have nothing to offer in exchange” (RA 1974d, 1974f).²²

²²Translated from Swedish.

The Swedish authorities, however, soon came up with something that they could uniquely “offer” to the ROK. When asked by the Swedish Foreign Ministry for advice, Ambassador Heckscher suggested using the Swedish vote in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on the Korean question:

[S]trong reasons exist to call for a comprehensive, confidential meeting with the ROK Ambassador in Stockholm. In this connection, to achieve change in the ROK decision, it is sufficient to point out that our vote on the Korean question at the United Nations shows that the official Swedish position has taken account of the state of the matter in question.²³ (RA 1974f)

Heckscher’s proposal was closely related to the earlier discussion on the shifting geopolitical significance of Scandinavia to the ROK in the early 1970s. By advancing ties with the DPRK, the Nordic region became a critical space for the ROK, and its ramifications were not only contained within the region, but reached into broader international politics, most notably, the UN debate on the Korean question. Since its first discussion in 1947, the Korean question had been on the agenda of the UN General Assembly for debate annually after the Korean War, with the main objective being the creation of “a unified, independent and democratic Korea” (Choi 1975, 395–98). The Western and Eastern blocs put forward competing resolutions to the Korean question, and the UN member states, including Sweden, discussed and voted on them. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the dominance of the West in the United Nations and American influence over the majority of the member states meant that the resolutions favoring the position of the United States and the ROK, over that of the Soviet Union and the DPRK, had generally received majority support and been adopted. Yet the admission of the newly independent former colonies in Africa and Asia during the 1960s changed the power balance within the United Nations, and the ROK had to put increasing amounts of diplomatic energy into securing support from the member states, because the UN debate on Korea was closely linked with the recognition of the legitimacy of the ROK state by the international community (Choi 1975, 398–99; Hong 2012, 122–23). From the late 1960s, it had become a regular practice for ROK officials to visit the Nordic countries prior to the UN debate.²⁴

The ROK position was continuously supported by the majority members until the twenty-seventh General Assembly session in 1972. However, a closer look at the early 1970s and the position of the Scandinavian countries reveals another picture. In 1971, because of the complex international situation, including the admission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations and the dissolution of the UN Commission for the Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea, fearing a possible defeat, the United States and ROK requested the postponement of the UN debate on Korea, based on the ongoing dialogue between the two Koreas (Hong 2012, 185–86). The same tactic

²³Translated from Swedish.

²⁴For example, the MFA organized diplomatic tours to the Nordic countries led by the following figures: Chin P’il-sik (deputy foreign minister) in 1969, Yun Sök-hön (deputy foreign minister) in 1971, Chang Sang-mun (assistant minister for political affairs) in 1972 and 1973, and Choi Kyu-hah in 1974 and 1975 (see KDA 1974).

was used in 1972. While the postponement was adopted at both sessions, Scandinavia's voting patterns diverged from the majority of Western countries. Scandinavia had historically backed the American and ROK position at the United Nations, but, for the first time, at the twenty-sixth session in 1971, Sweden abstained, and at the twenty-seventh session, Norway abstained and Sweden voted against the postponement (NAK 1977, 269). These moves, as well as the Nordic countries' recognition of the DPRK, were decisive blows to the ROK government.

Under these circumstances, in November 1974, Choi Kyu-hah, a prominent diplomat and former foreign minister, was dispatched as a special presidential envoy to the four Nordic countries, prior to the upcoming debate on Korea at the twenty-ninth session. It was during his visit that the ROK ambassadors strongly argued that the adoption practice hampered their diplomatic efforts. Upon his return, Choi recommended a policy shift to President Park (KDA 1974, 200–202). The Swedish authorities had expressed concern at how the UN debate on Korea had developed, since it increasingly functioned merely as political theater between the Western and Eastern blocs without creating any actual change on the Korean peninsula. Their votes in the early 1970s came out of this growing skepticism. During his meetings with the Swedish authorities, Choi had the same impression and anticipated that “no more than an abstention could be expected from Sweden” (KDA 1974, 106).²⁵ The Korean question was discussed on December 17, 1974, and, unlike Choi's prediction, Sweden as well as the other Scandinavian countries all voted in favor of the US-ROK resolution, resulting in its adoption (NAK 1977, 269; UNGA 1975, 31).²⁶

The Swedish authorities were well aware of the importance that the ROK government attached to the UN debate and its eagerness to secure support from the Nordic countries. When it became known that the second adoption suspension was triggered by Choi's recent visit, Ambassador Heckscher suggested using the Swedish vote in the UN General Assembly. During his trip to Seoul in late January 1975, Heckscher deployed this tactic in all meetings with high officials. He visited the MHSA and the MFA and went on to meet his old acquaintance and proposer of the suspension, Choi (RA 1975e, 1975f). The following reports on Heckscher's visit show how he drew on the Swedish vote for negotiation. The first excerpt is from Heckscher's own report on his meeting with Social Minister Koh:

[I explained that] North Korean propaganda had no influence on the Swedish view [on South Korea], for instance, indirectly evidenced by the Swedish government's actions on the Korean question at the United Nations. We also received a special gratitude telegram from President Park for that matter.²⁷ (RA 1975f)

The second was written by Kim Chŏng-t'ae, assistant minister for political affairs at the MFA:

²⁵Translated from Korean.

²⁶Of 138, 61 voted for, 43 voted against, and 31 abstained from the US-ROK resolution. On the resolution supporting the DPRK position, Sweden and Norway abstained, while Denmark voted against.

²⁷Translated from Swedish.

The Swedish ambassador explained that it was good that the Korean question was successfully settled. Heckscher then mentioned the ROK government's adoption ban to Scandinavia and argued that the adoption is only beneficial to strengthening the relationship between the two nations [. . .]. He added that if the ROK decides to stop the adoption, [. . .] the discrimination against Scandinavia would have repercussions including the rise of unfavorable Swedish views on South Korea.²⁸ (NAK 1974, 27–28)

This article does not suggest that the Swedish vote on the Korean question at the twenty-ninth UN General Assembly was directly shaped by the suspension of adoption. Rather, it is interested in teasing out how the Swedish authorities used the *results* of their vote in adoption negotiations with the ROK government. As the foregoing excerpts show, Heckscher did not explicitly correlate adoption with the Swedish position at the United Nations. Instead, he indicated the potential negative impact of the suspension on the Swedish view on South Korea, contrary to the North Korean criticism, which he claimed had “no influence.” As it was expected that in 1975, the UN General Assembly would discuss the Korean question again, the mere implication was more than sufficient for the ROK authorities to ponder the possible impact of the adoption suspension on the next debate, when the ROK, as Heckscher put, “may need our friendship and should not provoke us unnecessarily” (RA 1975g).²⁹

For the Swedish government, the adoption program in South Korea was a means of delivering its family policy, but also its identity as a welfare state depended on the ability to meet the political, economic, and social demands of its citizens. In the absence of other large sending countries, the continuation of the South Korean adoption, which accounted for nearly half of all international adoptions in Sweden, was a matter of profound significance.³⁰ Faced with possible closure, the Swedish authorities used diplomatic channels for negotiation and even drew on their vote at the United Nations. Toward this unfolding, the MHSA noted that, “in Scandinavia, the question of adoption is given the same weight as those of diplomacy and economy” (NAK 1974, 64).³¹

While the Swedish domestic welfare system enabled positive development and expansion of the South Korean adoption program, its foreign policy of neutrality negatively impacted adoption as the ROK feared the increasing influence of the DPRK in Sweden. Yet the Swedish authorities conversely used the very same neutrality to normalize adoption from South Korea. That is, in an attempt to change the ROK decision, Sweden strategically interpreted neutrality as belonging to *either* of competing parties, rather than *neither*, and highlighted the flexibility of its vote at the UN debate on Korea (Fischer, Aunelusoma, and Makko 2016, 6–7). As mentioned earlier, after the first adoption suspension, the Swedish authorities put significant effort into convincing the ROK government that adoption was for “mutual advantage,” recognizing their reliance on the cooperation of the ROK. The Swedish authorities believed that using the

²⁸Translated from Korean.

²⁹Translated from Swedish.

³⁰In 1973, 1,314 children moved to Sweden for international adoption, and of them, over 600 children were from South Korea.

³¹Translated from Korean.

ROK's eagerness for Swedish "friendship" at the United Nations would constitute a fair trade and stabilize adoption from South Korea.

Because of the continuous strong opposition from the ROK ambassadors in Scandinavia, however, adoption normalization did not come easily (NAK 1974, 40–42, 48–50). The second suspension was not lifted until the fall of 1975, close to the thirtieth UN General Assembly session. In September 1975, prior to the UN debate, Choi traveled again to the Nordic countries, and Swedish high officials raised the adoption issue in several meetings with him (RA 1975h). In Seoul, Consul General Berg and newly appointed ambassador Bengt Odevall had already spoken to several ROK officials on the increase in Swedish influence at the United Nations: not just the upcoming vote on the Korean question, but also the recent arrival of Heckscher in New York as the Swedish representative and Sweden's appointment as a nonpermanent member of the UN Security Council, which discussed the admission of the two Koreas to the United Nations (RA 1975i). However, much to the Swedish authorities' surprise, Choi this time strongly denied the "existence" of the adoption suspension policy targeting Scandinavia. Instead, he claimed that the current difficulties with adoption were "entirely on the practical level" and "not of a political nature" (RA 1975h).³² North Korean criticism was not mentioned at all, and Choi said that the problem only involved issues such as child transportation that could be solved by adoption intermediaries (RA 1975h).

When the first suspension was notified by Tahk in 1970, the Swedish authorities identified two different levels of causes: *political* North Korean criticism and *practical* administrative difficulties. In fact, procedural difficulties caused by the rapid increase in adoption and conflicts between CPS and the MHSA did exist, further impeding the Swedish adoption program (RA 1975e). But throughout the two suspensions, the ROK authorities highlighted the North Korean criticism, not only because it greatly threatened their position domestically and internationally, but also because it provided a *political* justification for introducing drastic measures such as country-specific, immediate stops to adoption. However, this had a double-edged effect, since the Swedish side used a similar tactic by drawing on their role at the United Nations. Hence, when the Swedish side deployed the same *political* means to normalize adoption, the ROK government concealed the political aspect of the suspension and instead claimed that it was a pure *practical* matter, not requiring the involvement of "high" politics.

The two suspensions demonstrate that in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Scandinavia became a critical ideological battleground between the ROK and the DPRK, and the political tensions between the two Koreas played out through those considered to be most marginalized in South Korean society: children sent overseas for adoption. While turbulent Cold War relations in Scandinavia and the Korean peninsula directly affected the cross-border placement of South Korean children, both the ROK and Swedish governments actively drew upon their foreign policies and unique Cold War positionality—South Korea as a divided nation and Sweden as a neutral country—to shape the adoption program in ways that met state interests. This significantly extends the current understanding of the relationship between international adoption and the Cold War, which argues that the existing Cold War relations gave rise to and were further consolidated

³²Translated from Swedish.

by child placements between particular nations, such as the United States and South Korea. Instead, the intense diplomatic negotiations around the question of adoption between the Swedish and South Korean authorities show that cross-border child adoption was not only determined by Cold War geopolitics, but also pushed both states to review and modify their foreign policies, thereby altering and constituting the very course of the development of the Cold War.

CONCLUSION

On October 6, 1975, the MHA tabled an item, “The Reopening of Overseas Adoption to the Three Scandinavian Countries,” at an upcoming cabinet meeting (NAK 1975). The reopening plan was approved but coincided with wide media coverage of T’ak-un’s story. The Swedish authorities at first discredited the story, but when information from Seoul confirmed the presence of T’ak-un’s birth father and his wish to have T’ak-un back, the Swedish government argued for T’ak-un’s stay in Sweden, pointing to the economic situation of his birth father, which supposedly was incompatible with the child’s “best interests” (RA 1975d). As seen throughout this article, the Swedish welfare state, built on the universalist vision of society, crossed national borders and even utilized its foreign policy to provide parenthood opportunities to all people. While this universalist ambition might appear progressive and transnational, the response to T’ak-un’s case shows that it was essentially a bounded project. Faced with the decreasing availability of adoptable children domestically, the primary concern for the Swedish authorities was securing South Korean children, whom they deemed available to be placed in other countries. There was little discussion of the impact of permanent separation on T’ak-un, and the notion of parenthood as a social right was not extended to T’ak-un’s birth family in South Korea.

Even though they had been struggling to change the minds of the ROK government on the adoption suspension, the Swedish authorities expressed firm opposition to T’ak-un’s return. This illuminates how powerful the assumed universal notion of children’s rights (to opportunity) and the image of saving South Korean children (from poverty) were in constructing the Swedish position on T’ak-un’s future, but also in depoliticizing the involvement of the Swedish state in international adoption more broadly. Yet this very sentimentalization of South Korean children as those in need of intervention from abroad was what made their overseas placements intrinsically political to the Park administration. Nevertheless, by the mid-1970s, adoption agencies annually arranged more than five thousand overseas placements from South Korea, significantly relieving the responsibility of the ROK state in social welfare. In other words, intercountry adoption, both as a problem and as a solution, occupied an ambivalent yet critical position in the aggressive modernization pursued by the Park regime.

Through a historical account of the early period of South Korean–Swedish adoption, this article has shown the co-constitutive relationship between child adoption and Cold War geopolitics. South Korean children moving to Sweden crossed not just national borders, but also the binary order of the Cold War, so their adoptions were highly susceptible to Cold War politics of the two Koreas, and adopted children, for their sentimental values, were drawn upon as powerful diplomatic tools. Yet such utilization of child

adoption for political ends took place side-by-side with a mobilization and modification of foreign policies of the ROK and Sweden for the purpose of adoption. That is, child placements, intimately intertwined with both countries' nation-building and state formation, did shape Cold War interstate relations. Therefore, the case of South Korean–Swedish adoption not only exposes the violence embedded in the Cold War divide, but also reveals how this order was unsettled through nonviolent means like adoption. Further, it suggests the need to expand our purview and explore the Cold War “from its edges” (Westad 2010, 8) as transnational linkages not typically considered central to the Cold War, such as South Korean–Swedish relations, can help us uncover more dynamic ways in which Cold War politics was experienced, challenged, and transformed.

With the diminishing media interest in T'ak-un, the MHSA resumed adoption to Scandinavia, but the number of children involved decreased significantly: while more than 600 South Korean children found adoptive homes in Sweden annually in the early 1970s, the number dropped to 266 in 1976 and 169 in 1979, and the program did not expand to the same degree again (MHW 2017). Sweden continued to hold significance to the ROK state for its close ties with the DPRK, but South Korean–Swedish adoption did not become another diplomatic dilemma as the ROK refrained from using country-specific measures.³³ Instead, the MHSA introduced broader child welfare policies in the second half of the 1970s (NAK 1976). These were, however, mostly short-sighted and only resulted in a temporary decrease in intercountry adoption, rather than reducing the overall numbers of children and families in need. Hence, the ROK state has continued to receive criticisms on the persistence of intercountry adoption not just from North Korea, but also from the South Korean public and the Western media.

What happened to T'ak-un? How was his life in Sweden? The last piece of information available in the state archives is his birth father's wish to hear from T'ak-un (RA 1975j). No further documentation was found. Neither Swedish nor ROK authorities wanted the case to escalate and rushed to close it after concluding that the birth father lacked the means and stability to raise a child. The radical variation in both governments' attitudes toward adoption—from political actions such as the suspensions and UN votes, to indifference and reduction to a private issue of parental capacity—is not arbitrary. On the contrary, it highlights that what ultimately guided the initiation, expansion, disruption, and continuation of the adoption between South Korea and Sweden, including T'ak-un's placement, was each state's use of adoption within their Cold War nation-building and international relations interests, and this at times directly undermined the welfare of children and their families, which both countries' statutes claimed to be the foremost objective of child welfare.

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³³The Korean question was last discussed in 1975 at the thirtieth UN General Assembly, which saw an extraordinary result of both resolutions from the Western and Eastern blocs receiving majority support. In 1976, both sides withdrew their resolutions prior to the debate and the question was no longer discussed. See Hong (2012, 378–84) for more details.

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