The "Baby box", an issue or solution to child abandonment in South Korea

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Abstract

A few years ago South Korea got a lot of attention from abroad. The phenomenon called “Baby box” emerged in modern society and gave mothers a place to abandon their baby in a safe environment. The purpose of this study is to trace how the phenomenon “Baby box” appeared and to understand what the situation of unmarried mothers in Korea are. By studying the Korean history of adoption practice, women’s limited status, the welfare system and law the author tries to find an answer to why so many unmarried mothers chose not to bring up their own children and instead give them up for adoption or even abandon them. The “Baby box” has become a place that saves lives of children as they are abandoned in a safe environment, however legalizing the “Baby Box” puts other issues on the table. The thesis raises the question whether the “Baby box” can be a solution to child abandonment in Korea or if the issues remain until legal action is taken.

Key word: South Korea, Baby box, Single mother, Adoption, Confucianism
Sammanfattning

För några år sen blev Sydkorea uppmärksammat i omvärlden. Fenomenet "baby box" eller på svenska, ”Bebisluckan” som har uppstått i ett modernt samhälle, har gett mödrar en plats att överge sina barn i en säker miljö. Syftet med den här uppsatsen är att undersöka de underligande faktorerna till ”Bebisluckan” härkomst, samt hur situationen för ensamstående mödrar i Sydkorea är. Genom att studera Koreas adoptions historia, kvinnors begränsade status, välfärdsystem och lagar, försöka finna ett svar till varför så många kvinnor har valt att överge sina barn istället för att uppfostra dem själva. ”Bebisluckan” har blivit en plats som räddar människoliv, men att legalisera ”Bebisluckan” kan få andra konsekvenser. Den här uppsatsen vill ifrågasätta om ”Bebisluckan” kan vara en lösning på problemet med övergivna barn eller om problemet kommer kvarstår tills andra juridiska beslut är tagna.

Nyckelord: Sydkorea, Bebislucka, Ensamståendemödrar, Adoption, Konfucianism
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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of Study

South Korea is a society where unmarried mothers and children out of wedlock are deeply stigmatized and child abandonment has been an issue neglected and pushed aside for a long time. In 2009, the phenomenon “Baby box” emerged in Korean modern society and received a lot of attention in both Korean and Western media. A documentary titled “The Drop Box” was made in the USA and won several awards at film festivals. The purpose of this study is to understand the issues and stigma around childbirth outside of marriage as well as the consequences of Korean women’s limited status that have caused child abandonment and eventually led to the opening of ”Baby box” in modern society. By studying the Korean historical adoption practice, the welfare and law system the author will try to find an answer to why so many unmarried mothers chose not to bring up their own children and instead choose to give them up for adoption or even abandon them on the streets. The “Baby box” has given mothers a place to abandon their babies anonymously in a safe environment, however, legalizing the “Baby Box” is also an issue. To make things clear, because my essay is focused on the “Baby Box” phenomenon in South Korea, therefore when I refer to Korea after 1948 North Korea is not included.

The questions this study will try to answer:

In chapter 2 I will clarify what a Baby box is and who started it. To answer these questions, I will look back at the history of the Baby box and examine the different views and issues with legalizing the Baby box. I will start with Europe, particularly Germany and France, but my focus will mainly be on South Korea.

In chapter 3 I will examine what are the underlying causes for establishing the Baby box in South Korea. This chapter will be divided into 4 parts:

3.1 The history of Korean adoption with a focus on Neo-Confucianism and its impact on Korean women and adoption. I will explain Korean society’s reformation during the Chosŏn dynasty. Until modern time Korean values are still influenced by Neo-Confucianism. In this part I will also explain the Neo-Confucianist impact on adoption during mid-Chosŏn dynasty based on a study by scholar Mark Peterson. Until modern time a practice that has been used by Confucian scholars. I will also write a short
summary of adoption during Japanese colonial rule and in the after match of the Korean War.

3.2 I will examine unmarried motherhood in South Korea and give an explanation of the meaning and stigma about the word “mihonmo.”

3.3 Korean Law concerning abortion and adoption, I will examine what the options for unmarried mothers are. First, a short summary on the history of abortion in South Korea. The dilemma with abortion that has been illegal until today. Second, the history of adoption in South Korea, with a focus on the years 2001-2017. Focus on “Special Adoption Act” and its consequences. About the law and the government’s endeavor to promote domestic adoption and the consequences of a stricter adoption policy. By analyzing statistics and law try to explain how the views and policy of adoption have changed.

3.4 Last, Korean welfare and support system for single mothers in Korea, I will examine what kind of support system exists and what the law regulations are. How it works for people in need as well as what improvement could be done and other solutions.

In chapter 4 I will present a discourse on the Baby box. I will clarify the trend for and against the Baby box. I will discuss if the “Baby box” is an issue or solution to child abandonment, as well as the consequences if the “Baby box” is closed down.

1.2 Methodology

By using the quantitative analyses I will study statistics of adoption from the period of 1953-2017. I have chosen to take 1953 as the starting point because that was after the Korean War, when South Korea faced a lot of hardships and the international adoption business started. However, the thesis will not go into further details on the statistical account before year 2000, as the main focus is on recent statistics of adoption that is connected to the “Baby box.” Statistics from 2001-2014, with a focus on 2013-2014, are important years after the “Special Adoption Act” was ratified, which made the adoption process more difficult in South Korea. Adoption statistics from 2015-17 are also mentioned, the focus will mainly be on the years when law changes were made that effected the adoption business. I will also analyze statistics with the percentage of single mothers living in Korea and at facilities divided by age. To get a deeper understanding of the Korean mind I will study the Korean history and views on women and adoption during the Chŏsun dynasty when Neo-Confucianism changed the social structure. I will also use the qualitative analyze by reading interviews with single mothers.
made by professors Sǒng Chǒng-hyŏn, Kim Chi-hye at Hyupsung University\(^1\) and Shin Ok-Chu at Chonbuk National University\(^2\). I have also analyzed interviews made by other newspaper reporters, to get a better insight into the problem and hardship women faces. These interviews I have read were only made with a few persons and they are anonymous, so they do not allow any general evaluation that represents the whole society. Neither have I met single mothers myself. Besides, I see some problems in the reliability of the existing research works, especially those of Sǒng Chǒng-hyŏn et al., there the selection of information is not clear because only a few questions have been addressed and they have only chosen to reveal 1-2 answers per each question. The interview is based on only 16 individuals with different background/age. Every case is personal therefore it only allows the reader to get some brief insight and understanding of the difficulties single mothers can face in society. Beside this research work it was difficult to find more comprehensive studies on this subject.

### 1.3 Sources

Research works on the “Baby box” are limited, therefore I have used a few newspaper articles as source material as well: from *The Guardian, Segye Ilbo, Hankuk Ilbo Svenska Dagbaldet* and *Dagens Nyheter*. I have read material in Korean, however, the issues are still not as well researched and developed as other issues on the Korean society, therefore my material has been limited and I had to rely on statistics from news articles and governmental sites, which have been difficult to confirm because the English version of some sites lack information compared to the Korean version. I have visited the Baby box center in Korea 2016, however, I was not able to meet Pastor Jong-rak Lee (Chǒng-nak Yi), the founder of Baby box in South Korea. I have watched the documentary “The Drop Box,” to get a better understanding of the process, however, the focus in the documentary is mainly on the background on the “Baby box,” the disable children that the pastor has adopted and people working around the “Baby box,” therefore I was not able to get deeper understanding on adoption and the process that comes after a child is being abandoned in the “Baby box.”

Studying Korea law and regulations is quite time consuming and a challenging task, as my major is not law and the Korean language barrier in law is still big. When I watched the documentary about the Baby box, I noticed that the Special adoption law was mentioned many times, therefore I decided to put the focus mainly on the “Special Adoption Act” and to

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\(^1\) Hyôpsǒng taehakkyo 협성대학교

\(^2\) Chônbuk taehakkyo 전북대학교
mention the previous act just briefly. In my reading of research studies on the “Special Adoption Act” I have used an English translated version of “Special Adoption Act” made by Sook Kim [Suk Kim] and Dong-Jin Douglas Hwang published in 2015 in the Journal of the Washington International Law Association, to verify the content mentioned in other research works. However, when comparing the Special Adoption Law with the previous “Special Act on Promotion of Adoption and Procedures” [Ibyang ch’okchin mit chŏlch’a-ē kwanhan t’ǔngnye pŏp], it has been difficult to verify exactly which paragraphs have changed because the law was completely revised. Even on the official webpage on Korean law there is a lack of information in this respect when trying to compare the “Special Adoption Act” with the previous act. The welfare system in Korea is constantly under development, therefore there have been some difficulties in describing the current situation for single mothers when reading older research works.

1.4 Transcription
I have used the McCune-Reischauer system for Korean Romanization, with the exception of famous people, whose names in different Romanization are commonly known in Media. For example, Pastor Lee Jong-rak is spelled “Lee” instead of “Yi” and “Jong-rak” instead of “Chong-nak”. The same goes with South Korea’s capital Sǒul, which will be spelled as “Seoul”.

2. The “Baby Box”
2.1 Background and History
Since a few years ago the phenomenon “Baby box” or “Baby hatch” as it is called in many countries, has been getting a lot of attention from the media regarding the issue of babies being abandoned by their birth mothers. The “Baby box” is a place where women can leave their child anonymously through a box in the wall at churches or hospitals. The spread of the Baby boxes in European countries has raised a lot of concern from the UN, because the “Baby box” is regarded as a practice that goes against the “children’s right to be taken care of and to be known by their biological parents.” The Baby box originally emerged in Europe during

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the medieval age. At that time it was run by the Catholic Church as a way for women to give birth anonymously. The so called “Foundling wheels” were revolving doors at churches that one would rotate to place the infant inside. In France in 1780 there existed about 250 “foundling wheels” and in 1833, it is said, 130 000 babies were abandoned in a foundling wheel. However, after the second half of the 19th century the foundling wheels started to close down. In Germany however the baby box had difficulties to be established and the few that opened up were only opened for a couple of years. The reason why it met with difficulties in Germany in contrast to France seems to have been because of religion. According to the Protestant belief the baby box was seen as something inhuman.

How did it come that the Baby box from the medieval times has emerged again in modern society? Intriguingly, Germany was the pioneer in Europe, to first open up a baby box in Hamburg in the beginning of 2000. Today in Germany there are over 100 baby boxes and it is also possible for mothers to deliver their baby anonymously at about 130 hospitals. In Germany, if somebody wants to give birth anonymously at a hospital, the birth mothers name will be registered under an alias. The personal information about the birth mother will be stored in secret at a state institution. At the age of 16 the child has the right to request the real information about the birthmother, however, the mother still has the right to refuse revealing her personal data. In that case it will be handed over to court. In France, Italy and Luxembourgh too, anonymous birth is legal. Besides the already mentioned Germany, in Europe the Baby box exists in Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary. In Japan and China baby boxes have also recently been installed. However, in China the boxes have been forced to close down by the government. The reason given was that the amount of children were too many to handle. The Scandinavian country Denmark has recently started a debate to open up baby boxes at hospitals. However, the number of

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7 Ramesh, “Spread of ‘Baby boxes’ in Europe.”

8 Kim, “Peibi paksū-wa îngmyŏng-ŭi ch’ulsan,” 331.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 318.

11 Ibid., 319.


babies abandoned in Denmark is estimated to be about one baby per year which is not even to some degree close to the scenario in Korea.14

2.2 The “Baby box” in South Korea

The first Baby box in South Korea was opened in 2009, in Nangok-dong, Seoul, by the Christian community for the disabled,15 Jusarang,16 aka.”God’s Love.”17 Pastor Jong-rak Lee [Yi Chong-nak] has been working with the Jusarang community for more than 15 years, focusing on helping the disabled and weak. Pastor Lee has a disabled son who was hospitalized for 14 years. Since hospital fees are really expansive in Korea, the family had to sell their house to pay for the fees. So Pastor Lee and his family had no other choice but to live at the hospital.18 Raising a disabled child in Korea is difficult since one has to stay with the child all the time and the hospital fees are very expensive. The Korean government offers nursing homes and also offers payment for assistance of the disable, however many has criticized that it is underpaid and assistants are not trained enough. A lot of parents caring for their disabled child would rather receive the personal and activity assistance allowance themselves instead. According to authorities, the current law tries to prevent abuse and neglect of the disabled person. Even if family members were to receive governmental pay it does not guarantee that they will take good care of the disabled person, who consequently might have difficulties in reporting abuse.19

Child abandonment in Korea is an issue that has been pushed aside and ignored for many years. There have been several cases of students giving birth to children in secret and abandoning them in the trash, mountains or other obscure places.20 In Korea it has been a common practice to leave one’s child in front of somebody else’s door if one cannot raise the child. In an interview in the documentary “The Drop Box” with Yong- Kwôn Oh, Secretary

14 Lagerwall, “Bebisluckor i Danmark.”
15 Jong-rak Lee, Chu sarang kongdongs’h’e- Jusarang Community, ed. Taesung Cho, trans. JC Park (South Korea: Jusarang Community Church, 2015).
16 Chu sarang kongdongs’h’e kyohoe 주사랑공동체교회 (Jusarang Church Community)
17 The Drop Box, directed by Ivie Brian (US, Pine Creek Entertainment, 2015.) 0:09:10.
18 The Drop Box, 0:09:28.
General Korean Alliance on Mental Illnesses, he mentions “If they can’t afford to raise the baby, they leave the baby in front of somebody else’s house and run away.” Pastor Lee of the Jusarang Community once found a child being abandoned in a box on the street and wanted to find a solution to the issue. The community got the idea to open up a baby box when hearing about the “Baby box” spreading in well-developed European countries. In Korea being pregnant outside of marriage is a matter that is deeply stigmatized and women are often left with no choice but to hide the truth. According to Min Hwang, who works for Women’s Hope Center that deals with crisis during pregnancy, all the girls they get in contact with are suicidal, because they do not want anyone to find out about their pregnancy. They are afraid of not having any future and not getting any support. Hwang also mentions that girls have been criticized and kicked out of high school because they were pregnant, even if the National Human Rights Commission has forbidden schools to do so. In this case the issue might not be lack of stricter policies, but need of change in the negative attitude towards adolescent pregnancy.

What happens to children when they are abandoned in the “Baby Box”? Pastor Lee himself has adopted many of the disabled children, however, since around 2012 the amount of children abandoned in the “Baby Box” has been increasing and it is estimated that around 200 children per year are abandoned, which has made it impossible for Pastor Lee to adopt all of them. Therefore, according to Jusarang community’s website, once a child has been abandoned in the Baby box, the child is reported to the police as missing. The police starts an investigation and if the parents are not found, they are sent away to child care facilities, according to legal procedures. The child is reported to the district office, taken to hospital, to a welfare center for children, a government-run facility and last the child gets its birth registration before it is being placed for adoption. In an article published by Segye Ilbo recently it is reported that about 1363 children have been abandoned in the Baby box. After the opening of the Baby box in December 2009, that makes it an average of around 150

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21 The Drop Box, 0:15:57 Yong-kwon Oh.
22 Lee, Chu sarang kongdongch’e, 10.
23 The Drop Box, 0:29:33 Min Hwang.
24 The Drop Box, 0:28:40 Min Hwang.
babies that are being abandoned in “Baby box” per year. However, that does not include the babies being abandoned on the streets.

Jusarang Community has five goals they want to achieve:

1. Revision of the “Special Adoption law.”
2. Legalization of the Baby box.
3. Establishment of a maternity support center for unwed mothers.
4. Establishment of a temporary shelter for infants.
5. Establishment of an education/welfare center for the disabled.

The “Baby box” has become a solution to save children from dying on the cold streets. However, legalizing the “Baby box” brings other issues to the table. The discussion of the “Baby box” tends in the direction that the “Baby box” is regarded as a way for mothers to get rid of their responsibility of being a parent or that it will encourage child abandonment. Others state that a child’s life is more important than the right to know your birth parents. In chapter 4 will give an overview over the discourse on the “Baby Box.”

3. Factors behind the Baby Box

3.1 History of Korean Adoption - The impact of Neo-Confucianism

History and development of a country is important to study to be able to understand how society’s views and culture has been formed. To get a deeper understanding of the Korean people’s view of adoption today, I will now take a look back at the history of Korean adoption.

Mark Peterson, professor of Korean studies at Brigham Young University, has analyzed government, private and official documents of Korea’s transition that took place in the mid-Chosŏn dynasty (15th -17th Century). According to his research made on Korea during Early Chosŏn dynasty, adoption was primarily something that occurred to solve a childless dilemma if an heir was not produced. In the beginning adopted children did not have to be male or a relative. Female children as well as children from the women’s lineage were adopted as well.

27 The Drop Box 0.14.53-0:15:17 and 1:40:00 News reporters around the world.
This adoption system is a.k.a. non-agnatic or cognatic adoption which continued until the mid of Chosŏn dynasty.  

During the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392) hereditary aristocratic families ruled the state, and they used marriage as a way to expand the power and reach a higher status in society. The learning of Chinese classical literature and the orthodox Confucian doctrine were highly valued by scholars and used as a way to determine family relations and to govern the state. At that time Confucianism co-existed with Buddhism, which was seen as a way for spiritual tranquility.

Women’s status during the Koryŏ dynasty was higher than and not as restricted as during the Chosŏn dynasty. Inheritance at that time was not only passed down to the eldest son alone, daughters also got an equal share of the property left by the parents and were therefore more economically independent. Women also had the right to take part in ancestor ceremonies. After marriage it was customary for the husband and wife to move into the woman’s natal home, which made her able to support her own family and earn the right to receive her share of inheritance. In a family membership was not determined on the principles of patrilineal descent, therefore there was no need to adopt a son when the family only had daughters. If the family didn’t have any children at all they could adopt a relative or non-relative, daughter or son, it didn’t matter. The focus was not on upholding the family line, instead economic reasons, such as securing property, slaves were more important. When Chosŏn dynasty was founded in 1392, Neo-Confucianism became the dominant state ideology and until today affected the view of women in Korean society.

Neo-Confucianism is a philosophy, religion and ideology that emphasizes harmony and hierarchy in the universe. The elements Yin and Yang, light and dark, represent harmony between earth and heaven. There the man represents heaven and woman represents earth.

29 Ibid., 16,107.
31 Eckert et al. Korea Old and New a History, 80.
33 Peterson, Korean Adoption and Inheritance, 111.
34 Deuchler “Women during the Yi Dynasty,” 8.
35 Peterson, Korean Adoption and Inheritance, 4.
There are five key relationships: Ruler to subject, father to son, husband to wife, elder to young and senior to junior. Confucianism values righteousness, filial piety, faithfulness, respect and politeness. In the human world harmony is important to keep the universe calm. The “Neo-Confucianization” of Korea met a lot of resistance and it was a long process. However, once it was accepted, Korea was even more orthodox in the learning than their neighbor countries Japan and China.

The establishment of the Confucian social order meant that the status of women declined. According to Peterson, in the early part of the Chosŏn dynasty equilateral inheritance was practiced. Both sons and daughters got equal share of inheritance passed down by their parents. This practice lasted into the 17th Century. Only a few families were organized according to the patrilineal pattern, which gave a lot of option to choose a rightful heir. With the increasing focus on the lineage the complex duties of ancestor worship placed great importance on the role of the son.

The classical Confucian ritual texts made the oldest son of the family an ideal person to perform the ancestral rites. The Confucian way of marriage implied that the married couple should move into the husband’s family, to follow the patrilineage. In addition to that women married out of their natal household and by that did not have the right to inherit from their natal parents. When her husband died she had the right to inherit from him, if there were no male heirs present.

Changes in the inheritance system from an equilateral system to a system wherein daughters were omitted and the eldest son inherited the most made it more difficult for women to be independent. The role of the eldest son increased and therefore the importance of a male heir in the family became essential. The use of an illegitimate son became a problematic issue as they had lost the right to participate in politics and get official posts since the 15th Century.

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38 Deuchler “Women during the Yi Dynasty,” 2.
39 Peterson, Korean Adoption and Inheritance, 7.
40 Ibid., 19.
41 Ibid., 109.
42 Ibid., 61.
43 Ibid., 162.
44 Deuchler “Women during the Yi Dynasty,” 28.
therefore they became less attractive options for adoption.\textsuperscript{45} Agnatic adoption became the ideal way to solve the problem if a male heir was absent.\textsuperscript{46}

According to Peterson there were three rules that laid the ground for adoption during the mid-Chosŏn dynasty. First, the adopted child had to be a male. Second, he had to be a relative, preferably a nephew, and third, in addition he had to come from one generation below the father in the lineage.\textsuperscript{47} In the families of the Yangban (aristocrats) the indigenous Korean adoption system was completely wiped out by the Confucian way of adoption practice.\textsuperscript{48} In the beginning of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, agnatic adoption increased dramatically. Those who did not have a son adopted an agnatic nephew. Female children were hardly adopted at all, only male children in the proper generation level, within the patrilineage.\textsuperscript{49} However, it is shown in records of adoption among commoners and slaves, there were cases of orphan children related through the women’s line being adopted into families, by widows or unmarried women. Another surprising fact is that the child was often a female.\textsuperscript{50}

\textbf{3.1.1 Korean Adoption practice during the Japanese colonial rule, 1910-1945}

During the Japanese colonial rule efforts were made by the Japanese regime to enforce new legal rules in the Korean society. However, they were more effective on paper than in reality as the Korean social norms remained strong.\textsuperscript{51} In 1894, the Kabo reforms had proclaimed non-agnatic adoption to become legal, however, after Japanese colonial rule was established in 1912, the Confucian way of adoption was reinforced. In 1938, adoption outside the family was made legal but this law was revised after Korea’s liberation.\textsuperscript{52} It was not until 1961 when the independent Korean adoption law was introduced that one could adopt children outside the family again. It was also the early period of international adoption.\textsuperscript{53} Between 1938-1961 altogether 4491 domestic adoptions were officially registered in the country.\textsuperscript{54}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[45] Peterson, \textit{Korean Adoption and Inheritance}, 160.
\item[46] Ibid., 190.
\item[47] Ibid., 22.
\item[48] Ibid., 107.
\item[49] Ibid.
\item[50] Ibid., 186-189.
\item[51] Deuchler “Women during the Yi Dynasty,” 42.
\item[54] Hübinette, \textit{Comforting on Orphaned Nation}, 33-34.
\end{footnotes}
3.1.2 Korean Adoption in the aftermath of the Korean War, 1950-1953

The Korean War is seen as the beginning of international adoption. The war lasted for three years and had devastating consequences. Innocent lives were killed and it perpetuates a divided nation, which has not even until today been united. Before the Korean War there were cases of international adoption but not to the same extent as after the war. It is estimated that about 100,000 orphans were left homeless after the War. Korea, known as the “Hermit Kingdom”, a country that has been threatened and oppressed by foreign powers for many years which has made the Korean nationalism strong. Because of the colonial rule by Japanese for 35 years and the following military occupation by the US army nationalism among Korean was very strong. Korean women, who were conscripted as comfort women to Japanese soldiers and were shamed by their own country, the so-called “GI babies” who were children between Korean women and UN soldiers, were abandoned by both parents. The shame after being sexually exploited by men or by having a child with a foreigner without marriage was strong. Many women that became pregnant with soldiers chose to give their children up because of the pressure and prejudice from society.

The issue of mixed race children was a hot topic in Western media but the exact numbers of children were always exaggerated. It is estimated that less than 1-2 percent of orphans were of mixed race. According to Hurh Won Moo (Hǒ Wǒn-mu), between 1950-1965 about 12,280 mixed-raced children were born and half of them were adopted.

3.2 Unmarried motherhood in Contemporary South Korea

Unmarried mother known in Korean as “mihonmo,” refers to a mother who gave birth to a child outside of marriage. It is also the definition used for women who are divorced, separated or widows who have a child without a “legitimate” father. In Korea a child born outside of wedlock is deeply stigmatized. In Western countries like Germany and France the view is

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55 Hübinette, Comforting an Orphaned Nation, 34.
56 Ibid., 39.
57 Ibid., 10.
58 Ibid., 108.
59 Ibid., 41-42.
more liberal and accepted. Compare to Korea, children born out of wedlock reaches a higher percentage. Because of the stigma regarding children born out of wedlock Korean mothers feel the need to hide their past and fear leaving any records behind. They do this to be able to survive in a patriarchal society where people believe that the only way for women/mother can reach a better “acceptable” social status is through marriage. What are the options for pregnant women without marriage?

3.3 Korean Law: Abortion and Adoption

3.3.1 Abortion

Since 1953 abortion has been regulated in the Korea Criminal Code (article 269 and 270). Although abortion is extremely restricted to a few exceptions and in most cases illegal, Korean women can still get an abortion illegally. The Minister of Health and Welfare, Chin Su Hŭi, stated in an interview with Munhwa ilbo that 340,000 abortions are done annually while 340,000 child births are being reported. However, scholars estimate, since abortion is illegal, the number of abortions might actually be as many as 1 million or up to 2 million per year.

In recent decades Korea, just like its neighbor country Japan, has been struggling with low birth rates, therefore the Korean government has been promoting a childbirth policy, where abortion is seen as a practice that threatens the fetus’ rights of life and should therefore be prohibited. Then how has it come that so many are able to get an abortion at clinics? During the 1960s the Korean government drove the “Family planning project.” There the agenda was to decrease the rapidly growing population by promoting people to give birth to fewer children per family. Korea was then suffering from mass poverty and overpopulation.

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63 Kim, “Peibi paksŭ-wa ingmyŏng-ŭi ch’ulsan,” 321. Note: children born outside of marriage are 34% in Germany and 55% in France.
64 Kim, “Peibi paksŭ-wa ingmyŏng-ŭi ch’ulsan,” 321.
65 Kim and Davis, “Conceptualizing Unmarried Motherhood in South Korea,” 113.
67 Note: There are four exceptions according to the law that can permits abortion; 1. Woman might be mentality or physically ill. 2. Been raped 3. Incest. 4. It would harm and cause death to the mother. Even in these cases if the fetus is more than 24 weeks old abortions is completely prohibited, Criminal Code.
70 Ibid., 285, 292.
71 Hübinette, Comforting on Orphanage Nation, 51.
Even if it was illegal abortion was used as a way for the government to control the growing population. Fertility rates in Korea have since the 1970s decreased from 4.5 children per woman to 1.2 in 2015, making Korea among 35 OECD (The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries the country with the lowest fertility rate.⁷³

According to the interviews and research carried out by Sŏng Chŏng hyŏn and his colleagues with unmarried mothers from support facilities, abortion is an option that many of the women consider, however, due to circumstances like costs and late knowledge of pregnancy women are left with no choice but to give birth. The cost of abortion is about 1 million to 1.5 million KRW (around 1000 dollar)⁷⁴ which is quite difficult to get across if you are still a student and do not have your own income. Today abortion is a controversial issue in Korea. Last year 230 000 Koreans signed a petition to abolish the law that prohibits abortion.⁷⁵ In 1980s, according to the Korean Constitution, any law that discriminates against women’s rights should be abolished.⁷⁶ Abortion is performed in an unhealthy manner and environment that could harm women; legalization would make abortion safer for women.

### 3.3.2 International and Domestic Adoption

Adoption has been a solution for unmarried mothers who are not able to care for their own child.⁷⁷ As mentioned earlier, the Korean War was the start of the international adoption business, which since 1953 until 2009 has sent over 235 630 children away for adoption.⁷⁸ Among them over 160 000, i.e. 69 percent of all adopted children have been sent abroad.⁷⁹ Since the beginning of the 1960s, Korea got its first modern adoption law, the *Orphan Adoption Special Act*, followed by the *Child Welfare Act*, which became the basis of the legalization of international adoption and enabled establishing one of the most efficient adoption businesses in the world.⁸⁰ In the after match of the Korean War, Christian and Western relief and rescue workers in Korea came to influence the developing of Korea’s

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⁷² Hübinette, *Comforting on Orphanage Nation*, 49.
⁷⁷ Kim, “Peibi paksŭ-wa ingmyŏng-ŭi ch’ulsan,” 322.
⁷⁸ Kim “Abandoned Babies,” 710.
⁷⁹ Ibid.
⁸⁰ Hübinette, *Comforting on Orphanage Nation*, 50.
social service like orphanage, institutions, adoption and welfare system.\textsuperscript{81} In 1967, after law amendment, every adoption was to proceed according to Korean law and was a collaboration between licensed Korean governmental agencies and Western counter partners.\textsuperscript{82} In the beginning of the 1970s there were seven adoption agencies established in Korea. Harry Holt, an evangelical Christian, established Holt International Children’s Service, one of the most well-known and leading adoption agencies still existing today.\textsuperscript{83} The Korean government was struggling with poverty and overpopulation crises during the 1960-1970s. Beside Confucianist prejudice, poverty was also one of the major reasons for women to give up their children for adoption.

Table 1 shows international adoptions from Korea between the years 1953-2004. By reviewing the statistics of international adoption shown in Table 1, the peak years when the most children were sent away for adoption were during the 1970s-1980s.

![Table 1](image)

From the end of the 1960s to mid-1980s the prime source of adopted children were young females working at factories\textsuperscript{85}. When Korea’s economy began to grow, unmarried college students became the prime source of adopted children.\textsuperscript{86} Since the 1990s, 80 - 90 percent of

\textsuperscript{81} Hübinette, \textit{Comforting an Orphanage Nation}, 40.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 50.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 19.


\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
children sent away for adoption were born by unmarried mothers.\textsuperscript{87} According to the Minister of Health and Welfare in 2009, unmarried mothers were the most common origin of children sent away for adoption, making 36.5\% in the 1970s and reaching up 92\% in 2005.\textsuperscript{88} Some researchers have drawn the conclusion that transnational adoption politics were used to handle the population crisis (Hübinette, 2005; J. Kim, 2009; E. Kim, 2010; Yngvesson, 2010.) Especially Hübinette implies that international adoption was used as way to get rid of certain children, like mixed race, disabled and illegitimate children.\textsuperscript{89} This thesis will not go into further details on the adoption statistics before year 2000, as the main focus is on recent statistics that is connected to the “Baby box.”

Through international adoption has a long history in Korea, it was not until 1988, when Korea was preparing for the Olympic Games that the issue was exposed to the world for the first time and Korea was deeply criticized for using adoption as a way to solve the problem with the country’s abandoned babies\textsuperscript{90}. In response the government started to promote domestic adoption by offering tax and healthcare benefits and other governmental subsides, which increased domestic adoption.\textsuperscript{91} In 2007, to reduce the amount of international adoption a domestic adoption priority system was introduced. For the first five months a child is only available for domestic adoption. That measure has since then reduced the amount of children being adopted abroad, however, it is still not enough to completely been able to omit international adoption.\textsuperscript{92} Also according to the current Korean adoption law, the “Special adoption act” [Ibyang t’ungnye pŏp] article 3, paragraph 4, the state shall preform a healthy adoption culture and promote domestic adoption.\textsuperscript{93} However, the welfare support for single parents has been ignored. Until today, welfare support for the adoptee and adoptee family is better than the welfare support for single mothers. That circumstance works against the idea of biological mother keeping and raising their own child.

\textsuperscript{87}Hübinette, Comforting an Orphanage Nation, 61.
\textsuperscript{90}Hübinette, Comforting an Orphanage Nation, 2006: 71-74.
\textsuperscript{91}Kim, “The Biopolitics of Transnational Adoption” 62.
\textsuperscript{92}Kim, “Abandoned Babies,” 713.
Adoption has been decreasing a lot in the last 15 years. As we can see in table 2, international adoption has been going down since 2007 when the law was enacted that prohibits sending a child away for international adoption for the first 5 months.\textsuperscript{94} The next drastic change can be seen between the years 2012 – 13 when the “Special Adoption Act” was ratified. Overall, from 2001 until 2014 the government’s goal to reduce international adoption and promote domestic adoption has been successful, however, in 2014 the international adoption rate once again increased and domestic adoption decreased again. The biggest change in this respect can be seen in 2013.

Table 2

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{international_adoption.png}
\caption{International and domestic Adoption}
\end{figure}

Source: Ministry of Health and Welfare\textsuperscript{95}

According to Korea data statistics site “E –Country Index” \cite{Korea_data_statistics},\textsuperscript{96} in the year 2015 out of 1057 children who were sent away for adoption 374 were international adoptions

\textsuperscript{94} Kim, “Abandoned Babies,” 713.

and 683 domestic adoptions. In 2016 the rate decreased to 880 children, among them 334 international adoptions and 546 domestic. That means a steady decrease in adoption, especially international adoption. According to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, in 2017 there were 701 applicants for adoption and out of the 863 adopted children 46.1% were adopted abroad and 53.9% were adopted domestically. Today Korea is the 11th largest economy in the world according to OECD. Sending away 398 children for international adoption in 2017 is still a problematic number.

As mentioned earlier, one of the goals that the Jusarang Community has been striving to achieve is to change the “Special Adoption Act.” This act was introduced in 2010 and legalized in 2011. According to the Jusarang community because of the “Special Adoption Act” the birth registration of a child became mandatory in order to apply for adoption, which has left women with no choice but to turn to the baby box because there is no other place they can leave their child anonymously. However, according to Kim Sang Yong from the Institute of Law Studies at Busan National University, the “Special Adoption Act” has not brought any difference from the previous law. Already under the “Special Act on Promotion and Procedures of Adoption” [Ibyang ch’okchin mit chǒlch’a-ē kwanhan t’ǔngnye pǒp], it has been mandatory to register a child under the parent’s name. There is a law called “Family Relation Registration Act” [Kajok kwan’gye tǔngnok pǒp], which stipulates that it is mandatory to register a child within one month after birth. If the child is born out of wedlock, the mother has to register the child. If the birthmother is missing, the adoption agency can become the legal guardian of the child until the adoption process is completed. In case the mother changes her mind she has the rights to revoke the adoption during the first 6 months and get legal guardianship of the child once again. If a mother decides to leave her child up

97. Ibid.
99. Ibyang T’ǔngnye pǒp, 입양특례법, [Special Adoption Act.]
100. Lee Jong-rak, Chu sarang kongdongkch’e, 15.
102. Kajok kwan’gye tǔngnok pǒp, 가족관계등록법, [Family Relation Registration Act.]
104. Sook Kim [Suk Kim] and Dong-Jin Douglas Hwang, trans., “Special Adoption Act,” article 12, 22.
for adoption, her information will disappear once the child has been adopted. However, Korean people know that if you leave a record of a child in your name registration, then it is possible for anyone to find out about this information. Especially in the future if a man who intends to marry a woman finds out that she had a child before, he might reject her.

There are three new conditions that were introduced by the revised law. First, a child is only allowed to be put on for adoption seven days after birth, and all documents regarding the child’s birth- and adoptee parents are needed. Second, the biological parents have to receive consultation regarding the possibilities of raising the child by themselves. Third, the adoption has to go through the family court in order to be approved. In many cases before people could lie and declare themselves as the legal parents. Aside from trying to reduce the international adoption and to promote domestic adoption, the “Special Adoption Act” is also an attempt to keep children with their biological parents. However, according to Sook K. Kim’s study published in 2015, the weakness of the “Special Adoption Act” is that the adoption process has become too burdensome for the birthparents. Kim further explains, the social and cultural circumstances around adoption and children out of wedlock in the Korean Society are neglected and therefore it is difficult for the “Special Adoption Act” to succeed in reality.

3.4 Korean Welfare and Support System for Single Mothers

While adoption has been decreasing, the number of single parents wanting to raise their children has been increasing. According to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in 2010, since 1997-2005 the percentage of unmarried mothers raising their children has increased impressively, from 6.9 percent in 1997 to 31.9 percent in 2005.

Table 3 shows the statistics of 2015, how many unmarried women there are in South Korea divided by age. There are a total of 35,088 unmarried parents in Korea, and 24,487 of them are unmarried mothers.

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105 Kim, “Peibi paksŭ-wa ingmyŏng-ŭi ch’ulsan,” 324-325.
Most studies about single mothers are about single mothers living in facilities, not single mothers living by themselves in the community. Especially single mothers who have cut ties with their family have difficulties in getting welfare support from the government. The social stigma of being an unmarried mother has led to difficulties for women to get help and reach a higher status in society. As mentioned earlier Korea has developed from being one of the poorest countries in the world to the 11th largest economy. However, the welfare system has not yet kept up with Korea’s growing economy. Korea’s rapid industrialization, uneven economic development and strong patriarchal society are factors that have neglected women’s issues for many years. Unmarried motherhood is seen as a threat to the patriarchal

Source: KOSIS (Korean Statistical Information Services)\textsuperscript{111}

Table 3

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
2015 Unmarried Mothers & \\
\hline
100 & 100 \\
\hline
20 Under & 12 \\
20-24 & 18 \\
25-29 & 13 \\
30-34 & 8 \\
35-39 & 11 \\
40-44 & 17 \\
45-49 & 20 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{113} Gurria, “The OECD and Korea.”
social structure and it has been difficult for Koreans to acknowledge that they are a group in 
need of help.\textsuperscript{114}

For women in the Korean society, chastity is seen as one of the most valued virtues. 
According to research made by Kim Eunjeong [Kim Ūnjǒng] and King Davis, unmarried 
mothers in Korea are seen as promiscuous women who have sinned by sexual intercourse 
outside of marriage.\textsuperscript{115} However, according to studies made by the Korean Ministry of 
Welfare in 2001, unmarried mothers have only had one relationship with a man, the father of 
the child. The lack of sexual education and ignorance about unmarried mothers is seen as a 
problem.\textsuperscript{116} Unmarried mothers and their children face discrimination and negative attitude 
not only in society but from their families as well. Kim Hosu explains, one of the reasons 
behind the negative attitude and stigma around unmarried mothers, lies in the deeply rooted 
normative and traditional patriarchal family structure in society. Society’s view on sexual 
intercourse before marriage might have changed; however, the traditional patriarchal ideology 
still affects the general view of unmarried- and single mothers. To give an example, Kim 
mentions the patrilineal family registrations system, “hojuje,” which was not abolished until 
2008 and made single mother’s cohabitant with her child instead of a mother.

To get a deeper understanding of challenges unmarried mothers’ experiences with pregnancy 
and childbirth, Sǒng Chǒng-hyǒn and colleagues at Hyǒpsǒng and Chǒnbuk University have 
for their research carried out in-depth interviews with 16 unmarried women. In the interviews 
it was found that many of the participants dealt a lot with doubt and fear when they found out 
about their pregnancy. Many blamed themselves of not having control of the situation and not 
being able to take responsibility of their own “mistake”. In the absence of a father they 
received a lot of stress from people in their surroundings, being chased out of the house by 
their family, and continuously being persuaded to have an abortion or give up the baby for 
adoption. In fear of the future if they register a child born out of wedlock under their name, 
they search for a solution. However, when researching on the internet, information about 
parenthood is lacking. The possibility of raising a child by oneself remains uncertain. There is 
a need to promote single parenting and childcare support.\textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{114} Kim and Davis, “Conceptualizing Unmarried Motherhood in South Korea,” 109-10. 
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 113. 
\textsuperscript{116} Kim and Davis, “Conceptualizing Unmarried Motherhood,” 113. 
\textsuperscript{117} Sǒng, Kim and Shin, ”Mihonmo-ūi lmsin ch'ulsan wigi,” 287-304.
According to the Korean Women’s Development Institution (KWDI) there were four main support programs run by the government for unmarried mothers in 2010: The Single Parent Family support program (SPFS), the National Basic Livelihood Security System (NBLS), the Childcare Support system and the Healthcare and Nutrition Services.\footnote{Yi et al., “Yangyuk mihonmo chiwŏn pokchi,” 11-20. And Noh, Han and Yang, “Societal and social service experiences of unwed mothers,” 57.} The SPFS focuses on different kind of social services for single parents with a focus on unmarried mothers. However, the program has failed to encourage unmarried mothers to keep their children and therefore has been criticized for not been efficient enough. The SPFS program also has a single parent’s assistance program; however, it is only available to mothers under the age of 24.\footnote{Noh, Han and Yang, “Societal and social service experiences of unwed mothers,” 57.}

The National Basic Livelihood Security System (NBLS,) offers free medical services and housing to help the poor. However, to be an applicant eligible to receive help, not only the applicant but her family (including siblings) has to live below the poverty line, which is based on the\footnote{Note: Korean minimum living cost in 2015, 1,051,048 KRW/month for a family of 2 people. “Ch’oejŏ saenggye pi (yŏndo pyŏl, Kagu kyumo pyŏl)” KOSIS, July 26, 2018. Accessed 2018-07-30. http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=117&tbid=DT_33104_N101#} minimum living cost\footnote{Note: Korean median income in 2018, 2,800,000 KRW/month for a family of 2 people. “Kijun chungwi sodŭk ch’ŭi” E-Country index, January 22, 2015. Accessed 2018-07-30. http://www.index.go.kr/potal/main/EachDtlPageDetail.do?idx_cd=2762#quick_02} measured by the Korean government. Relative poverty line in Korea is also defined as a family living with an income less than 50% of the population’s\footnote{Yi et al., “Yangyuk mihonmo chiwŏn pokchi,” 8.} median income.\footnote{Yi et al., “Yangyuk mihonmo chiwŏn pokchi,” 8.} This means that if the single mother’s family is seen as economically capable of supporting the mother and her child, they are not viewed as having financial difficulties and will not receive welfare support, even if the mother has cut all contact with her family.\footnote{Yi et al., “Yangyuk mihonmo chiwŏn pokchi,” 8.} Therefore many unmarried mothers are unable to receive help from these services.

The Childcare Support System is a governmental support service for parents with children. The amount of financial support given depends on the income level and the age of the children. The Healthcare and Nutrition Services Program is offered at maternity homes, community centers and also included under the NBLS services. The program offers different
kind of health services before and after child birth. Both of the last service programs mentioned has been helpful in supporting single parents.

The welfare system in Korea is limited to the low-income population. According to the Korean Unwed Mothers Families’ Association (KUMFA), an organization started by unmarried mothers themselves, single parents can receive 120,000 KRW a month as welfare support from the government. However, it must be proven that you are under the poverty line. In Noh, Yang and Han’s study on “Societal and Social Service Experiences of Unwed Korean Mothers Who Rear Their Children” in 2015, it is reported that the monthly welfare benefit for unmarried mothers was 70,000 KRW per month until the child is 12 years old, but only if you don’t have a living coast exceeding 130% of the minimum living cost, which means that the childcare support just recently increased to 120,000 KRW per month.

According to information given on the Ministry of Gender Equality site, in 2018, you can receive 130,000 KRW/month, if you are under the median income line with 52%. This indicates that if a single parent is younger than 25 and has an income less than 1,500,000 KRW/month, this single parent is eligible to receive 130,000 KRW/month until the child is 14 years old. A mother older than 25 years is eligible to receive 50,000 KRW more per month until the child is 5 years old. Middle school and high school mothers can receive 54,000 KRW more per month.

Since 2012, domestic adoptive parents receive unconditionally 150,000 KRW/month until the child is 16 years old and they even receive healthcare benefits, which single parents do not receive. This can be seen as strange because adoptive parents have to consist of two adults, which increases the opportunity to earn money and makes raising a child at the same time much easier. For many years Korea has driven a policy that actually makes it easier for women to send their children away for adoption than to raise their children by themselves.

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124 Noh, Han and Yang, “Societal and social service experiences of unwed mothers,” 30.
126 Noh, Yang and Han, “Societal and Social Service Experiences of Unwed Mothers,” 58.
127 Note: When talking of Korean age you have to reduce two years.
129 Noh, Yang and Han, “Societal and Social Service Experiences of Unwed Mothers,” 57, 65.
130 Ibid., 65.
In an article published by the *Korean Herald* in 2016, there have been cases where mothers have been denied welfare support from the government because they need to submit information about the father, which might be difficult to find if you lost all contact with the father of the child.\(^\text{131}\) In Korean, under the SPFS program, there is a system that makes childcare support mandatory to pay for noncustodial parents, however, many single mothers have been struggling with receiving childcare support. As childcare should be a financial burden for both parents to share, however, according to a KWDI study in 2011, only 9.39 percent, 20 of 213 single mothers were receiving childcare support from noncustodial parent.\(^\text{132}\) Childcare and welfare support for single parents is important for women to be able to stay on the job market and improve their living conditions, especially for the child’s well-being.

**3.4.1 Maternity Homes for Single Parents**

Maternity homes are known in Korean as *Mihonmosisŏl*. Since the 1980s maternity homes has become the most well-known social welfare institution in helping single mothers. The number of facilities has since then expanded from 3 to 33 facilities in 2012.\(^\text{133}\) However, along with the expansion the number of unmarried mothers at the facilities has also increased. In the mid-2000s, more than half of all the maternity homes were managed by adoption agencies.\(^\text{134}\) Although the maternity homes are there to help unmarried mothers emotionally and practically to give birth and care for their children, 70-95% of the unmarried mothers staying in these facilities decide to give up their children for adoption.\(^\text{135}\) Kim Hosu, suggests that in order to convince unmarried mothers to give up their babies for adoption, maternity homes have been used as a tool to control mothers.\(^\text{136}\)

In the revision on the Single Parents Support Act\(^\text{137}\), from 2015, adoption agencies will no longer be able to operate or establish institutions/facilities that support unmarried mothers.\(^\text{138}\)


\(^{132}\) Noh, Yang and Han, “Societal and Social Service Experiences of Unwed Mothers,” 57.

\(^{133}\) Hosu Kim, *Birth Mothers and Transnational Adoption Practice in South Korea: Virtual Mothering* (New York: Springer Nature, 2016), 84. And Noh, Yang and Han “Societal and Social Service Experiences of Unwed mothers,” 58.

\(^{134}\) Kim, *Birth Mothers and Transnational Adoption*, 84.

\(^{135}\) Ibid.

\(^{136}\) Kim, “The Biopolitics of Transnational Adoption,” 60.

\(^{137}\) Han pumo kajok chiwŏn pŏp [Single Parents Support Act ], article 20, paragraph 4,2. (South Korea.)

\(^{138}\) Sŏng, Kim and Shin, ”Mihonmo-ŭi imsin ch’ulsan wiği,” 280. And Noh, Yang and Han “Societal and Social Service Experiences,” 65.
This has caused 16 of the 33 Basic life support facilities\textsuperscript{139} in the whole Korea to shut down, which reduces the number of facilities into half. Of course, facilities that promote adoption instead of parenting is not good, however, instead of just forcing the facilities to shut down, new facilities that help single parents should be opened instead. In some cities all facilities are closed down which makes it difficult for women in some areas to get any support during their pregnancy at all. The court has given the facilities 4 years to be shut down with no other solution presented.\textsuperscript{140}

Table 4 shows the percentage of unmarried mothers living in maternity homes divided by age in 2005-2009.

\begin{table}[	extwidth]
\centering
\caption{Table 4\textsuperscript{141}}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Year & Ages 19 or Younger & Ages 20-24 & Ages 25-29 & Ages 30 or Older \\
\hline
2005 & 35 & 16 & 11 & 9 \\
2006 & 41 & 15 & 11 & 9 \\
2007 & 34 & 36 & 19 & 11 \\
2008 & 38 & 15 & 16 & 23 \\
2009 & 35 & 35 & 26 & 37 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textit{Source: 2005-2009 Internal Data of the Ministry of Gender Equality & Family}

In Table 4, as shown there are mostly adolescents or women in their early to mid-20s living at the facilities. This is the most vulnerable age in terms of independency form family mentally and financially. It is the age when education background is often lacking. The data are already over 10 years old; however as unmarried mothers still have difficulties in society, the percentage might be similar today as well. Mothers living at maternity homes are allowed to have a job however, some of the maternity homes have cohabited rules, which indicates that

\textsuperscript{139} Note: Kibon saenghwal sisŏl (Basic life support facility) a part of the Mihonmo cha kajok pokchi sisŏl (Single mother and child’s family support facility)

\textsuperscript{140} Sŏng, Kim and Shin, ”Mihonmo-ŭi imsin ch’ulsan wigi,” 280-283.

\textsuperscript{141} Yi et al., ”Yangyuk mihonmo chiwŏn pokchi,” 9.
you should equally work and help out with household chores, which prevents mothers from going to work. After giving birth you are not allowed to stay at the facility with the child. This puts a lot of pressure on the mothers, in terms of finding a residence and rearing a child at the same time. ¹⁴²

Table 3 shows the statistics from Korean Statistical Information Services (KOSIS), how many unmarried mothers there are in South Korea divided by age in 2015. As mentioned above, there are a total of 24,487 unmarried mothers. With unmarried fathers included there are 35,088 unmarried parents living in Korea.¹⁴³ There are no earlier data published to compare the statistic with, as table 4 only includes unmarried mothers living at maternity facilities. When analyzing statistics in table 3 it is difficult to estimate if it only includes unmarried mothers. In Korean the word “mihonmo” also includes divorcees and widows.

By examining table 3 it appears as if adolescent pregnancy in Korea is only a small percentage, however, there are of course some factors to consider when discussing adolescent pregnancy. In a 2014 handbook on international adolescent pregnancy published in the United States, the Korea representative Kim Jinseok [Kim Chinsŏk] reports that in Korea there is an increasing number of adolescent mothers deciding to keep their babies, however, about 80 percent of unmarried adolescent mothers are left with no choice but to give their baby away for adoption, even if it is against their will. ¹⁴⁴

In 2009, the study by the Korea Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention, it is revealed that the average debut year of those who experience sexual intercourse was 14 year old, with boys debut year being 13.8 years, slightly younger than girls 14.3 years of age. Since the data does not include those who had yet no experienced sexual intercourse, the result does not give the whole picture of the average actual age of the first sexual intercourse. Only 42% among those who experience sexual intercourse have used some kind of contraception, which is an increase form 28% in 2005. ¹⁴⁵In case of adolescent pregnancy many Koreans chose to get an

¹⁴² Ibid., 17.
abortion. In 2008, a survey it revealed that 88% of girls who experienced pregnancy have at least once had an abortion.  

Another important fact to keep in mind when discussing age differences among single mothers is that the services needed for unmarried mothers in their 10s and 20s might be different from what single mothers in their 30s and 40s might need. Age, education, carrier, family status are all important factors when discussing welfare support. It is difficult for a single mother to get a stable job if you are going to raise a child as well. Especially if a woman has not been able to finish school education or has no experience of working at all. Society and work life in Korea is a struggle for women. After work, overtime, low wages, short vacation make it difficult for women to have time to raise a child by themselves. To add up to the sum, Korean people spend a lot of money on education for their children to be able to get into a top university and later be employed at a great company.

When discussing the Korean welfare system for single parents, suggestions for improvement are difficult to pinpoint exactly. The governmental financial funding for welfare support is a too wide area to cover in this thesis, as all relevant data could not be included. To conduct more interviews and provide statistics on single parents is one way to be able to discover issues, find solutions and solve problems in the future.

4. The “Baby Box” discourse

The “Baby box” has raised a lot of debate about the issue of unwanted babies, not only in Korea, but around the world. For a single mother isolated from society with difficulty to get help, to abandon a child even if it is against human nature, the baby box has become the last resort to solve the problem in case she is afraid to leave any record in her family register. Today, the “Baby box” has saved lives of many abandoned babies, however, having a society where babies are given away for adoption without any record of their birthparents is bad for the baby’s future and goes against UN convention, “a child’s rights to know their parent.”

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147 Kim and Davis, “Conceptualizing Unmarried Motherhood in South Korea,” 114.
149 Note: United Nations “Convention on the Rights of the Child” Human rights, (New York, 1989): Article 7. (1) "The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.” (2) "States Parties shall ensure the implementation of these rights in accordance with their national law and their
In South Korea, the “Baby box” is not a legitimate solution to operate since law prescribes that you have to register your child under your family registration. Before giving away a child for adoption, the parents have to be informed by the adoption agency about the possibility and support available if you decide to raise a child. The Baby box facilities offers consultation for single parents about the options and chances of raising a child by on your own, but, before receiving any kind of consultation, the mother can just leave the child in the “Baby box” anonymously without any notice or registration.

However, should it be decided to shut down the “Baby box”, the result will be bad as well, because the underlying factors in the Korean society still remain. Babies will still be abandoned on the streets or maybe in another type of “Baby box” that will start to operate instead.

Jusarang Community and Sook K. Kim [Kim Suk K.] blames the Special Adoption Act for that it has increased child abandonment since implementation. According to Sook K. Kim, the Act has made the adoption process more burdensome for parents what has led to a decrease of adoptions being preformed. 150Inforcing law that focuses on decreasing adoptions may be seen as a solution to the problem at hand however in the long run the “real” problem remains unsolved. The Act encourages birth parents to raise their children on their own but since the stigma and culture of raising a child out of wedlock in society remains parents might not find the courage and support to raise their children by themselves. However, to blame the “Special Adoption Act” seems wrong as well, because the act promotes a better adoption culture, which involves more focus on trying to keep the child with the biological parents through counseling and in case of unavoidable adoption, domestic adoption is prioritized.

In Korea, the stigma around single mothers with children out of wedlock is deeply rooted in the society, therefore there is a need to help and to keep child birth anonymous. However, it is difficult to protect both a mother’s anonymity and the child’s right to know their parents. A solution presented by Kim Sang-yong, in his law review on the “Special Adoption Act” would be in accordance with the law in Germany, to give women the possibility to give birth anonymously while at the same time the child is registered under the mother’s name. Without obligations under the relevant international instruments in this field, in particular where the child would otherwise be stateless.”

150 Kim, “Abandoned Babies,” 721.
151 Ibid., 716.
the mother’s consent this information can not be revealed to anyone. In that way a child is
given the possibility to receive information about his or her biological parents at the same
time as a mother’s record is hidden under an alias. The only problem Kim finds is how the
registration system should work in practice. Because you can not leave out the fact that the
child could later search for the mother, which can jeopardize the harmony of mother’s new
existing family. Kim solution is similar to the already existing process with adoptivees
wanting to meet their biological parents, that should a mother deny her information be given
out, she has the right to do so. However, according to Kim the new process would be that the
case can be taken to court to be re-considerated.

Legal abortion is also something the society might have to reconsider. The rights of a fetus is
absolutely important to consider, however, when comparing to the rights of a fully grown
human being, a women’s right of her own body is in question.

The Korean society has rapidly changed in a short time. The Korean people may still be quite
conservative when it comes to changes, however, they also appear to be very eager and
impatient for changes. Recently the TV program “The Return of Superman”, focusing on
famous dad’s staying at home and taking care of their children has been gaining popularity.
The society might not be ready yet for the stigma around unmarried women, adoption,
abortion and out of wedlock children to disapear in the near future. The acceptance,
awareness and support of unmarried mothers must increase and improve in order for them to
be able to get both economical and social encouragement when raising their children by
themselves. It is only if you raise awareness of an issue that a change can be made.

Conclusion

The phenomenon “Baby box,” a modern revival of a medieval practice that provides mothers
with a place to abandon their babies anonymously in a safe environment, has raised a lot of
questions around the world about the issue of unwanted babies. In Korea, the Christian
Community Jusarang has since it’s opening of “Baby Box” in 2009 been able to save over
1300 children. However, a society where babies are being abandoned without any registration
of their biological parents is an issue that goes against a child’s rights to know their parents.

152 Kim, “Peibi paksŭ-wa ingmyŏng-ŭi ch’ulsan,” 324.
153 Syupŏmaeni torawatta 슈퍼맨이 돌아왔다 [The Return of Superman.]
The aim of this thesis was to trace how the phenomenon of the “Baby Box” has emerged in modern Korean society. The thesis tried to find an answer to why so many unmarried mothers chose not to bring up their own children and instead send them away for adoption or even abandon them.

By examining the Korean history of adoption practice and society’s reformation during Choson dynasty, the impact of Confucian heritage affected the roles of both women and men, emphasized on the importance of patriarchal family structure, which has until modern time limited women’s status. Despite modernization of Korean society and a more open minded attitude, the general view on single and unmarried mothers still remains negative and stigmatized.

By analyzing statistics on adoption, single mothers and using other scholar’s research works made in Korea and internationally, this thesis aimed to provide a better understanding of how things have led to the current situation in Korea. The consequences of the Korean War, was the start of a massive international adoption business, which has until today even though the governments endeavor to promote domestic adoption, been difficult to end. During the 1960-1980s, Korea was as an underdeveloped country was faced with poverty and overpopulation crises. Stricter policy run by the government to control the growing population, succeeded to reduce fertility rate, which today has led to other issues with a growing older population.

Through interviews made with unmarried mothers conducted by other scholars and journalists, the ambition was to get a deeper in-sight on the problems and dilemmas that unmarried and single mother’s faced during critical phase of their pregnancy. The conclusion of the interviews shows that information regarding options and welfare support for single mothers is in need of improvement. Furthermore there is a need to make the information more accessible on the internet and provide women with a place they can go to and get all the help they need throughout their pregnancy.

The chastity of women, lack of sexual education, illegalization of abortion, lack of information about welfare support available and a long history of international adoption practice, has put a lot of stress on unmarried mothers over the years. Not to mention the ratification of a new adoption law, that made the adoption process more burdensome for the birthparents. Child abandonment in Korea is an issue that has been pushed aside and ignored for many years. In the last chapter of the thesis, the study tried to make a discourse on the
“Baby box,” as an issue or solution of child abandonment. The “Baby box” has saved many children from dying on the streets, however, it does not prevent mothers from abandoning their babies. Neither will banning the “Baby box” solve the issue of child abandonment in Korea. The “Baby box” can be seen more as a consequence of an issue in the Korean society, which needs time and help to solved.

The thesis hopefully provides the reader with a deeper understanding of the issue and stigma around child abandonment and single mothers in Korea. The study also hopefully helps to raise awareness of the difficulties single mothers face in Korean society. Lastly, hopefully the thesis can help and possibly contribute to a wider acceptance of single and unmarried mothers, so that they can find social- and economical encouragement that allows a mother to live according to what would be the best for her and the baby, ultimately providing the possibility to raise her child by herself.

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