

BOOK REVIEWS

CATHERINE CENIZA CHOY

Global Families

A History of Asian International Adoption in America

New York: New York University Press, 2013. 229 pp.

Perhaps one of the more popular, contemporary images of international adoption is that of Angelina Jolie's family of six kids, three of whom are adoptees from Cambodia, Vietnam, and Ethiopia. Their story foregrounds the phenomenon of international adoption through the framework of global family making, which, as defined by Catherine Choy in her new book, *Global Families: A History of Asian International Adoption in America*, involves "the decisions made and actions taken by people who create and sustain a family by consciously crossing national and often racial borders" (9). Choy explores the historical background of international adoption in the United States and uncovers a multifaceted phenomenon that looks beyond US foreign relations and cultural imperialism to include a broader and deeper understanding of how migration, race, global family making, identity making, and intimacy converge to shape the dynamics of international adoption.

International adoption in the United States came to prominence after the Second World War, which saw the rise of orphans and mixed-race children born to American servicemen and Asian, European, and African women. In particular, the reception of mixed-race children from Korea and Japan (biracial individuals are called "hafu," meaning half-Japanese) proved unfavorable because of prejudice against cross-cultural marriages. The American media highlighted this discrimination as an expression of a "backward" Asian society, while they rescued mixed-race children and provided them a better life through adoption in the more prosperous United States. Choy sees this as a flawed reflection of a "progressive" American society, who also

contributed to their discrimination through its anti-miscegenation laws that prohibited interracial marriages (22). Indeed, the 1950s saw the rise of orphanages and foundations by religious organizations that sought to house and care for the children, and arranged for their placement into adoptive American families.

In the book, Choy challenges the narrative of a culturally progressive America and paints a more sobering picture. In the records of the International Social Service-USA (ISS-USA), she uncovers the issues over the placement of international adoptees in American families: falsification of adoption documents to better suit the adoption criteria, ethical considerations in the giving up of the child by their birth families, problems of uprooting adoptees from their home countries, and finding alternative solutions such as local adoptions and educating social service institutions in Asian countries. Moreover, non-government institutions, religious-based adoption organizations, and advocates of individual adoption altered the processes by which the US government, through ISS-USA, facilitated international adoption. They created their own networks and alternative avenues for placement, including, for instance, the proxy method, which “sidestepped professional standards of investigation of the child’s and adoptive parents’ backgrounds, and of supervision of the adoptive placement” (93). This made the process harder to regulate, and the international adoptees more difficult to track. The conflict between social service agencies and non-governmental adoption advocates also raised questions over the acceptable practices. This rivalry is further explored in Chapter 3, “A World Vision-The Labor of Asian International Adoption,” which also discusses the significance of individual efforts of Harry Holt, Pearl S. Buck, and actress Jane Russell in propagating international adoption work in the United States.

In Chapter 4, “Global Family Making,” Choy presents the family narratives that detail the challenges of raising an international adoptee in an American family and society. Their stories include the difficult initial stages of familiarization with the family, bullying in school, and fitting in with their peers by intentionally sounding and looking American. Their stories bring forth issues of race that Asian Americans in general continue to experience even in a progressive multicultural environment of the United States.

Choy’s emphasis on race as an often overlooked factor in the identity making of international adoptees opens up the challenges of multiracial child rearing and family making. In an effort to idealize

kinship as more important than cultural differences, adoptive families who raise international adoptees in an emphatically American tradition and environment tend to gloss over their racial distinction. Choy points out a loss of history and memory in the process of acquiring a new identity in an international family setting. Their assimilation into the adoptive society is greatly challenged when they fail to reconcile their physical “Asian-ness” with the distinct “whiteness” of their family members and peers. The inconsistencies found in the daily interactions that made them feel different from their peers increase the ambivalence of belonging in their adoptive American society. As their narratives reflect in Chapter 5, “To Make Historical Their Own Stories,” attempts to fit in had, more often than not, led to realizations and questions of their “otherness.” Their search for answers allow them to discover their own personal histories and to create counter-narratives that, for some, correct perceptions of their identity, while for others, translate into forms of resistance.

Amidst the current decline in international adoption¹ because of stricter laws and treatises and increasing activism against it, *Global Families* sheds light on an important question: How does international adoption contribute to the acceptance of marginalized biracial individuals in a multicultural society? As adoption activists like Jane Jeong Trenka and Deann Borshey Liem, Korean adoptees who searched for their roots, are becoming more visible and vocal of their personal stories that reflect the difficulties of international adoption, they challenge the common notion of international adoption as a chance at a better life. Questions about identity and belongingness surface as they grapple with the truths behind their adoption stories and the need to reconcile their cultural and familial heritage with their adoptive (American) society. Furthermore, Choy situates international adoption within the ambit of history and Asian American studies and gives a critical space for discussing international adoption beyond the purview of family and social work studies. By looking at its historical development, it highlights the role of national and local actors and examines their contributions to international adoption vis-à-vis family making, national foreign policies, and global migration. It presents a

1 The total number of international adoptions worldwide reflected a significant decrease, from 45,299 in 2004 to 23,609 in 2011. The number of international adoptions received by the United States also decreased from 22,884 in 2004 to 8,668 in 2012. Data taken from the Hague Adoption Convention and Peter Selman, Newcastle University, as cited in CNN, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/09/16/world/international-adoption-main-story-decline>.

critical perspective in examining the nuances between and among culture, race, and family, all important factors that continue to shape the dynamics of international adoption.

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LEILA S. CHUDORI

Pulang Sebuah Novel | **Homecoming** A Novel

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Fifteen years after the fall of Soeharto, the age of Reformasi, as it is popularly known, has finally reached the Indonesian literary scene. Not only is a novel published with its complete original content (which was omitted during Soeharto's New Order regime), but Indonesian readers also have a choice in which literature they read. Many of these "new" novels deal with the tragedy in 1965, when up to one million people were slaughtered, marking Soeharto's ascent to power. Indeed, literature is now finally taking on the mantle in order to help unravel one of Neues Ordnung's biggest taboos.

Beside the fact that Ahmad Tohari is now able to have his novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* (The Dance Girl from Paruk Hamlet) published completely, at least six other novels about the 1965 tragedy have appeared on the shelves in the last five years. Gitanyali (nom de plume of journalist Don Sabdono, a.k.a. Bre Redana) published two novels: *Blues Merbabu* (in 2011) and *65* (in 2012). Female writers such as Tinuk Yampolksy had her work, *Candik ala 1965*, published in 2011, followed by Ayu Utami's *Cerita Cinta Enrico* (Enrico's Love Story) published in 2012. Laksmi Pamuntjak also published *Amba* (English title: *The Question of Red*) in 2012. It is in this genre that Leila S. Chudori writes her first novel, *Pulang*.

It should be noted that Tohari belongs to those senior writers who have based their novels on their own experiences before and during the turbulence of 1965. Another writer is the late Umar Kayam, whose short stories deal with the same subject (both these authors' works were actually published during Soeharto's reign, albeit in an incomplete form). Gitanyali, whose parents were communist activists,