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What Is the Value of Chloe Kim's Gold Medal?

Julayne Lee · Thursday, March 1st, 2018

The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Olympic Charter shall be secured without discrimination of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. – Olympic Charter, Fundamental Principles of Olympism, #6

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If you're watching the Olympics, then you probably know the name Chloe Kim. At 17, she's the youngest to win a gold medal in the women's snowboard halfpipe and has captured the hearts of thousands of fans on social media. I'm one of those shameless fans who has jumped on the bandwagon. So what is the value of Kim's medal? A gold medal at the PyeongChang Olympics is valued at approximately \$570. That's an expensive piece of hardware and would be more if it were actually solid gold. In South Korea, where Kim earned her gold medal, unwed mothers receive ₩70,000 Korean won per month (about \$66 USD) from the government. The value of an Olympic gold medal? More than eight months' support for unwed moms.

<https://youtu.be/p8brfJAULgc>

I've had a myriad of thoughts and feelings since I first heard South Korea would be hosting the 2018 Winter Olympics. Ambivalence best sums it up but I also considered staging a demonstration at the Olympics so people would understand the ugly truth about South Korea's baby exporting history. I'm one of 200,000 overseas adopted Koreans who exist as living evidence of the Korean War. In 2006, adopted Korean American Toby Dawson won the bronze medal in freestyle mogul skiing. His Olympic medal cast him into the media spotlight which eventually led to his reunion with his Korean family and honorary citizenship from the mayor of Busan, South Korea. This felt like a slap in the face to overseas adopted Koreans that the only way to be an honorary citizen is to win an Olympic medal. I believed we should all have the right to reclaim our Korean citizenship. Dawson became an ambassador for Korea's bid to host the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics in South Korea and is coaching the Korean national freestyle mogul team.

2018 marks the 30th anniversary of the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics at which time South Korea's baby export business was exposed to the world. After the 1988 Olympics, Korea greatly reduced the number of children being sent abroad. How far has Korea advanced since 1988, in particular from a social welfare perspective? Isn't this what the Olympics are all about? "Putting human beings first. To build a better world through sport." While the number of children being sent abroad is now less than 5% what it was during the Seoul Summer Olympics, it seems in

contradiction with the Olympic charter and spirit to allow a country that exports and sells its people to host the Olympics. I had similar thoughts during the 2008 Beijing Olympics as China is one of the highest sending countries for inter-country adoption (ICA). I felt conflicted then as I do now in celebrating athletes like Kim and other Asian Americans like Nathan Chen knowing the host countries are not taking care of their own.

2018 also marks the 30th anniversary of Matthew Rothschild's January 1988 article in *The Progressive* "Babies for sale. South Koreans make them, Americans buy them." Written before the Olympics, Rothschild's article has been foundational to my critique on inter-country adoption (ICA). In the opening paragraph, Rothschild identified ICA as a South Korean business where babies are exported to the United States for about \$5,000 per child. The total estimated cost today according to Holt International's website is \$37,680 – \$52,850. For this price tag I could buy a brand new SUV, make a down payment on a mortgage or begin to finance my MBA at a top tier business school. With the agencies generating this much revenue, couldn't they budget a portion to support unwed moms? Or would that impact their supply chain of children for their adoption pipeline?

I didn't pay much attention to the 1988 Olympics and a publication like *The Progressive* would never have found its way to my conservative, Midwestern home. I believed the narrative of abandonment and that growing up in America was better than aging out of an orphanage in a distant country I could barely locate on a map. I had no idea that as South Korea developed economically, the majority of children being sent abroad were coming from unwed mothers not orphanages. What began as a humanitarian gesture had evolved into a multi-million dollar industry and reinforced discrimination against unwed moms.

I moved back to Korea to live and work in 2004 and the timing couldn't have been more perfect. In 2004 Adoptee Solidarity Korea (ASK) was founded in Seoul by overseas adopted Koreans (OAKs) living in Korea. It was the first grassroots organization to critique ICA and advocate for alternatives. Through ASK, I met several unwed moms, both those who chose to raise their children despite the stigma and also expectant mothers who were contemplating whether or not to send their children abroad for adoption. They were faced with a choice that didn't seem to have viable options. How could they raise their children when their own parents didn't know about their grandchildren?

According to the U.S. State Department, 260 South Korean children were sent to the USA for ICA in While this is a significant drop from previous years and in the years surrounding the 1988 Olympics in particular, this means 260 Korean families were disrupted and divided for the purpose of adoption.

When the joint Korean team walked together during the 2018 Olympic opening ceremonies under the flag of a unified Korea, I was moved to tears. I would love if in my lifetime we could witness the signing of a peace treaty to officially bring the Korean War to an end. At the same time, as reunification between the north and south is discussed, I don't think this conversation is truly complete without a thorough look at reunification between east and west: bringing an end to South Korea's ICA program and giving full consideration and support to reuniting the 200,000 families that have been divided through ICA from Korea. Is it not hypocritical and contradictory for Korea to facilitate and promote north/south family reunions while systematically dividing families in the south via ICA and doing everything in their power to prevent OAKs from reuniting with their Korean families? I began my search for my Korean family more than 15 years ago and my

experience has been one of frustration and secrecy. Because the agencies have a history of falsifying adoption records, it's difficult to know what if anything in my adoption file is accurate, making my search all the more challenging. Agency workers confirmed that my birthdate recorded in my adoption file may in fact be off by a few months and that the location of my orphanage in Daejeon does not necessarily mean my Korean family is from this region. Unlike some adopted Koreans, my file contains no family names or photos. Each time I've visited my agency in Korea, I've been given new information which raises questions that no human should have to ask about their personal history.

I've been watching the Olympics more than usual not so much for the athleticism but more for the media coverage. My hope is for the South Korean government to truly live up to the Fundamental Principles of Olympism and "put human beings first." To host the Olympics once and be a baby exporter was shameful and embarrassing. To host the Olympics twice and still be a baby exporter is perhaps unforgiveable. 2018 can be a year to celebrate Korea rectifying the past and moving forward from its notorious reputation as a baby exporter, especially considering the nearly 20,000 adopted Koreans who never received their U.S. citizenship and who are either living in deportation limbo or have already been deported.

As I've been watching the Olympics, I've observed there's been no mention of children being sent abroad for adoption or unwed moms (but plenty of intentional mispronunciation of PyeongChang). Perhaps this is because South Korea would prefer we remain invisible. I'll be watching the closing ceremonies with a box of Kleenex in case I become emotional again. My mixed feelings have become more complex with Olympic joy for redemptive stories like Nathan Chen's historic performance and hope for a unified Korea not only between the north and south but also between the east and west. With each medal ceremony I watch, I can't help but think that the gold dangling from the athlete's neck atop the podium is worth more than eight months of government support for unwed moms in South Korea.

(Image courtesy of Monster Energy)

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