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TV

K-drama Adoption Storylines Are Making Positive Strides, But There's More Work to Do

“Having diverse characters leads to endless possibilities for storytelling. And there are infinite ways to tell an adoptee’s story...”



BY JAE-HA KIM

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South Korea has a long, complicated history with how the country has dealt with babies born to unwed mothers (and indigent families) — history that's reflected in K-dramas and the way the country's entertainment portrays adoption.

Since 1953, **approximately 200,000** children have been sent overseas for adoption from South Korea, with the majority of them flown to the United States. Initially, **adoption was viewed as a way to remove mixed race children** — who were born to Korean mothers and American soldiers during and after the Korean War — from society.

Due to the country's history as "**baby exporters**," adoption is a somewhat taboo subject in South Korea. But many Korean dramas don't shy away from the topic, which pops up often (*Vincenzo*, *Sweet Home*, *Coffee Prince*). Even *Squid Game*, Netflix's all-time most popular series, has an adoption element. The North Korean defector, Sae-byeok (**played by Jung Ho-yeon**), asks Gi-hun (Lee Jung-jae) to care for her younger brother — who is waiting for her in a child welfare center — if she dies. He eventually keeps his promise, sort of. Gi-hun shows up at the home of an elderly family friend with the boy, and a suitcase filled with his prize money. He asks her to raise the orphan and she happily agrees. This scene is meant to convey a sense of optimism in a pessimistic series. But it opens up questions about the morality of his actions. Even if Gi-hun had legally adopted the boy (which isn't likely), *giving* him away to someone else — no matter how well-intended — isn't legal.

Adoption as a K-drama Trope

K-dramas are an art form that blur reality with fantasy for entertainment purposes. There are several recurring tropes that pop up often in **many K-dramas**, such as the *second lead syndrome* (where two attractive men vie for one woman's attention) and the meddling wealthy parents who try to break up their adult child's relationship. There are also subplots about child abandonment and secret adoptions. But all too often, adoptees — especially those raised in the West — are treated as a fictional afterthought.

Ryan Gold (played by Kim Jae-wook), the lead male character in *Her Private Life*, is a super rich, handsome, and successful art director. Though he is a U.S. national, he is somehow fluent in Korean when he returns to Seoul for work. Viewers can hypothesize that since his adoptive mother is Korean American, he picked up the language from her. But that's erroneously assuming that Korean Americans all speak Korean. And even if she was fluent in both English and Korean, **studies** show that growing up hearing two languages at home won't necessarily make the child bilingual. The scriptwriters' one concession to his foreignness was to play off the stereotype that Westerners — even those who *look* Korean — can't handle spicy food.

"An adopted child in Korean dramas is a cinematic trope," says Min Hyunjun, a visiting professor in film studies at Seoul's Yonsei University. "It is true that the issue of adopted children is a shameful aspect of Korea, but I think that Korea has gone beyond the level of worrying about the loss of national status due to fictional stories."

This wasn't always the case. Decades before South Korea became an economic powerhouse known for its technology, cuisine, and pop culture, the Korean government tried to quell criticism that it didn't take care of its most vulnerable citizens – not with any relevant social changes, but by working the system. In 1988, the Korean government asked adoption agencies to **stop sending babies overseas** until *after* the Summer Olympics in Seoul were completed, so it could present a deflated number of children adopted out of Korea. At that time, 60 percent of the 10,000 foreign children adopted annually by American parents hailed from South Korea.

"South Korea has the longest history of sending away its children and it cannot be explained by war or poverty anymore," says Lee Kyung-eun, director of Human Rights Beyond Borders and author of the book, *The Children-selling Country*. "The stories of intercountry adoptees in K-dramas is the embodiment of our fantasy – the imagination of Korean people. Because when a country sends out such a huge number of children, there is this hope that it was for the child, for their welfare, for their future – that it is much better for them to go out of this country than to just stay here."

In order to maintain this fantasy, many K-dramas present transracial adoptees as having affluent adoptive parents, according to Lee – a former director of Amnesty International Korea – who points out that these shows offer the impression that it's easy for adoptees to assimilate back into their birth culture.

In essence, Koreans are hoping adoptees are success stories like **Fleur Pellerin**, whose real life embodies the ideal adoptee narrative. Then a member of the French Civil Service, she returned to South Korea in 2013 – the first time since she was adopted by a French family. But even this brilliant, accomplished woman didn't speak any Korean, a language she never heard growing up. And even though she didn't show any profound interest in her birth country, or express any desire to reunite with her first family, her high-ranking status earned her the kind of **acolades** usually reserved for celebrities in Korea.

"I have met many adoptees who came back to Korea, but I never met an adoptee who can speak Korean," said Lee. "It is not that simple. The Korean language is completely different from English or European languages."

South Korea's "Dirty Little Secret"

Whitney Fritz was six months old when she was adopted by a Nashville family. Her first job out of college was teaching conversational English to students in Korea.

“There is this double standard where English is pushed on all the kids at a young age, but when someone who looks like me speaks English, some of the locals are enraged,” says Fritz, who writes about adopted life on wethelees.com. “During that time, I literally was chased down an alley by a Korean lady who was screaming, ‘You are Korean! You should only speak Korean!’”

Fritz said it was hurtful that the very people she had hoped would welcome her were so much harder on her than they were on white English teachers, who were not expected to speak any foreign language. Koreans didn’t view her as either Korean or American, she said, but rather as an outsider who didn’t fit their idea of who she should be.

“I love Korea and look forward to visiting again, but there are issues there,” Fritz says. “It’s paradoxical [about how many adoptee stories there are in K-dramas], because for so long, adoptees were kind of like South Korea’s dirty little secret. Nobody in Korea wanted to acknowledge adoptees, even though everybody in the world knew that Korea was kind of like a baby exporter. But yet, to be acknowledged [in K-dramas], it’s also a small step forward. We’re kind of represented. There’s so much more that could go into character development and what it’s realistically like. Not all adoptees speak their birth languages. It’s not something you just know.”

At least some K-dramas do make an attempt to address this language issue. In So Ji-sub’s *I’m Sorry, I Love You*, the actor plays a character who was adopted by an abusive Australian family, before being discarded and forced to live on the street. As a young man, he moves back to Korea with the goal of seeking revenge on his birth mother who “threw” him away. Initially, he knows almost no Korean and doesn’t understand that honorifics are an integral part of Korean culture. A friend advises him to add ㄹ/yo at the end of every sentence, which indicates that the speaker is showing respect.

But more often than not, an adoptee’s ability to speak Korean is treated as something completely normal, rather than an impressive exception. In *Vincenzo*, Song Joong-ki portrays the titular character, who was adopted by an Italian couple when he was eight years old. After his adoptive parents are murdered, he’s raised by a powerful mob family and eventually becomes the Don’s trusted consigliere. A poignant scene depicts how he became such a great fighter – he had to learn to protect himself from bullies, who beat him up for being Asian. But there is no mention of how this Italian lawyer became fluent not only in conversational Korean, but also Korean legalese.

Vincenzo also finds his birth mother quickly – another trope presented in K-dramas. Granted, he has a high-powered mafia family that can open doors for him. But in reality, **less than 15 percent of adoptees are reunited with their first families**, according to 2012 to 2015 figures released by the Korean government.

Transracial Adoptees and Their Identities

“It is true that the understanding of the identity and the real lives of overseas adoptees is remarkably low in Korea,” says Lee Jeeheng, a cultural studies scholar at Chung-ang University in Seoul. “It’s like turning a blind eye to the fact that the adoptees are abandoned by their home country. As a result, many K-dramas and film representation of adoptees has remained at a superficial and lack-of-understanding level. The adoptee setting has been used as a tool to paint a tragic color of the character. It bothers me, because [scriptwriters] never hesitate to use it as a device. Adoptees are often depicted as fluent in Korean. This unrealistic description – where it cannot properly reveal their linguistic and cultural heterogeneity – is partly because of state nationalism, which defines overseas adoptees so easily as Korean.

“To [many Koreans] in Korea, Koreans living in the West have been objects of yearning, due to the Western supremacy view. And people do not see overseas adoptees and Korean immigrants separately. So as with overall descriptions of Korean Americans, overseas adoptees are usually depicted as a privileged group. Overseas adoptees are often regarded as lucky ones, because they can grow up in [what is perceived as] a much better environment than in their motherland – as if the only thing they lack is longing for their roots and birth mother.”

You Are My Spring presents a nature vs. nurture premise, where a pair of twins are sent to live at a child welfare center. One will remain in Korea, while the other will be adopted by a wealthy U.S. family. But the supposedly philanthropic organization that housed these boys is a cover for child trafficking. While this scenario is fiction, **similar occurrences have taken place around the world**, including **South Korea**.

Joy Lieberthal Rho is a New York-based psychotherapist and social worker who specializes in Korean adoption, identity and development. She also is an adoptee and the founder of **I Am Adoptee**. Though there is a prominent character with an adoptee background in *You Are My Spring*, Rho says she connected most with the Korean American character who’s friends with the female lead.

“She was all that I was imagining an adoptee who returns to Korea to be like – feisty, mixing up her idioms, furious when she finds out her boss was being harassed, cursing,” Rho says. “She was a delight, and the actress was so good. I was always thinking, ‘How cool would it be to have her as an adoptee as her backstory?’ While all adoption stories don’t need to be positive or tragic, there is a way to be light and real. Nuance, I suppose, is all I seek. K-dramas are capable of tackling complicated issues.”

For instance, Rho points out that *Itaewan Class* addresses racism and nationalism in a matter-of-fact way. In that series, Kim To-ni is a biracial character who is half Korean and fluent in the language. But when he is hired to work at a cafe, his colleagues are perplexed that he can’t speak English. And despite his protestations, one of them refuses to acknowledge him as a Korean, because he doesn’t *look* like the homogenized version of a *real* Korean.

“There were a few close friends of mine who had Korean kids with brown skin that I would take out for ice cream or lunch from time to time,” says Chris Lyon, the American actor who played Kim To-ni. “I was

watching one of them playing outside, giggling with their little friends from school when the topic of a foreign celebrity's nationality came up. One of the kids looked at this girl and said, 'They're just like you. You're not Korean, either!'

“Her smile instantly disappeared and she immediately shot back, ‘Yes, I am.’ And as they were going back and forth about it, I looked at her face, and I could tell this was a misconception that she was constantly having to confront. They were telling her that even though one of her parents was Korean and she lived in Korea her entire life, she couldn't possibly belong to their community. I'm sure the other children meant no harm. But parts of society are inadvertently telling people that they don't belong to any social group – that there essentially is no established community for them.”

And herein lies the dilemma for intercountry adoptees. They *look* Korean, but are nationals of foreign countries. While tourists who are perceived as foreigners are given leeway to make language or etiquette errors, there is an expectation that someone who looks Korean will inherently behave just like Korean nationals.

“We're either portrayed as an extreme success or a tragedy,” says adoptee Sara Jones, the president of InclusionPro, which builds strategies for diversity, inclusion and equity. “Maybe it's too boring to just show the realistic life of an adoptee. I'm not wealthy by any means in the United States, but it's interesting to see comments on my [TED talk](#) (about being a transracial adoptee) that say, ‘I'm so glad you're successful in America.’ Those perceptions are still there and people miss the reality of what it means to be adopted. It's not just being placed in a family and then finding your birth family. It's a lifelong journey of self discovery for each individual. That freedom to be able to choose your identity is the more realistic adoptee journey.”

More Nuanced Portrayals of Adoptees

There is still a mindset in some Korean programming that adoptees should be grateful for having any kind of family. Even when a domestic adoption is depicted in a K-drama, they're told how lucky they are ... but that they shouldn't expect too much more than what they already have. In *Doctor Crush*, Ji-hong (Kim Rae-won) is the adopted son of a wealthy doctor who operates a hospital. Despite his superior skills as a physician, Ji-hong isn't viewed by his peers as his powerful father's successor. Why? Because they're not blood related.

Adoptees also are presented as *less than* characters who are literally there to save someone else's life. In *The Penthouse* trilogy, a switched-at-birth storyline goes rogue, with one young girl adopted by a wealthy Korean American family in California. After they harvest one of her organs to save their biological son's life, they

unadopt her and ship her back to Korea. In *Kill Me, Heal Me*, an orphaned child is punished whenever a sadistic father's biological son makes an error.

K-dramas have been making strides with more thoughtful storylines. In the 2020 drama *When the Weather is Fine*, the adoptive parents of a young man literally fight their neighbors, who believe that since Eun-seob (Seo Kang-joon) is adopted, it's OK to send him off on dangerous search-and-rescue missions they would never ask their own children to do. As one of the villagers said, "What does it matter? It's not like he's your *real* son!" The truly sad part is that Eun-seob agrees with him.

And just 16 minutes into the first episode of the police thriller *Chimera*, a homicide detective (played by *Squid Game*'s Park Hae-soo) makes small talk with a Korean American former FBI agent, Eugene Hathaway (Claudia Kim), who happens to be fluent in Korean. When he marvels at how good her Korean is, she doesn't come out and say she was adopted, but alludes to it — she was raised by American parents. Eugene tells him she has been in Korea for a year and spent most of her free time hanging out with Korean students and watching Korean television. In other words, she wasn't fluent when she landed at Incheon Airport. She worked at it.

A Matter of Human Rights

Some Korean series have begun to address adoption as a human rights issue that needs to be rectified. In the political series *Chief of Staff* — which stars *Squid Game*'s Lee Jae-jung and *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha*'s Shin Min-a — lawmakers try to get a bill passed that would increase financial support for low-income mothers "who are in the blind spot of Korea's welfare system." This would allow them to raise their children rather than relinquish them for adoption.

And one of the story arcs in *Move to Heaven* focuses on Matthew Green (played by Kevin Oh), a Korean adoptee whose American parents never finalized his U.S. citizenship. After he is convicted of a crime, he is deported to South Korea — a country that is literally foreign to him. The plot mirrors the life of **Phillip Clay**, who was *returned*, as if he was defective merchandise. But Clay — who died by suicide in Korea — was just one of around 18,000 U.S. Korean adoptees who, as of 2020, are at the **stateless** stage, according to Chung-ang University's Lee — because their adoptive parents failed to fill out the documentation to obtain the children's citizenship.

The authenticity of the Matthew Green character was reinforced by casting a Korean American actor, who convincingly spoke the kind of broken Korean that a U.S. national might muster during his time there. "He should learn to speak Korean if he came here," one employer derisively says about him in the show. "So many losers crawl into Korea thinking they can get by just speaking English."

This is the type of comment Whitney Fritz heard during her time teaching English in South Korea.

“They didn’t understand how we could be Korean and not understand the language, even though they were the ones who sent us away,” she said. “Many of us were babies when we were adopted. We didn’t speak *any* language at all.”

What differentiates *Move to Heaven* from many other K-dramas is its willingness to show the complicated aspects of adoption and South Korea’s role in it. These stories are just as important – if not more – as those of Ryan Gold and Vincenzo.

“Having a variety of characters is a very important element for Korean scripted series,” says So Jae-hyun, a Studio Dragon producer who worked on *JIRISAN*, as well as *It’s Okay to Not Be Okay*, which was **lauded for the way** it depicted mental health issues. “From a Korean perspective, an adopted person is one of many characters who are there to move the story along. Having diverse characters leads to endless possibilities for storytelling. And there are infinite ways to tell an adoptee’s story, such as showing from their eyes the challenges they face. It could be educational and inspirational for viewers.”

It is unrealistic to expect K-dramas to address every issue that adoptees face. But if writers can create shows about monsters annihilating sinners (*Hellbound*), a neuroscientist tapping into the memory of his dead cat (*Dr. Brain*), and zombies overtaking the Joseon Dynasty (*Kingdom*), they surely can conjure up an adoptee character who’s neither a murderer or a superstar — but simply a person whose backstory includes adoption.

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