

The Need

The Korean War ended with the signing of an armistice in 1953, splitting the peninsula along a demilitarized zone and leaving, in its wake, many orphaned and vulnerable children. The war also devastated the Korean economy, causing widespread poverty. Unable to provide for their children, many families saw international adoption as a way to give them a better life – a belief shared by many unwed Korean mothers who, fearing the stigma of out-of-wedlock birth, chose to relinquish their children. Also facing a lifetime of discrimination were the many mixed-race children born during the war to Korean mothers and American GI fathers. For these children, international adoption often seemed preferable to a life of poverty and prejudice.

Beginning in the 1960s, South Korea experienced rapid economic and social change, emerging during the last decades of the century as one of the “Tigers of Asia.” As the nation grew more prosperous, so grew the role of the Korean people and government in the welfare of their children, including greater cultural acceptance of domestic adoption.

Traditional Confucian values, which place great emphasis on bloodline, nevertheless remain entrenched in Korean culture. Although more unwed mothers are choosing to parent their child, discrimination makes life extremely difficult for them. For many Korean children, social stigmas still create barriers to having a permanent, loving family within their birth culture.

Holt’s History in South Korea

Moved by images he saw of malnourished war orphans, Harry Holt embarked on an historic voyage to South Korea in 1955. That year Harry and his wife, Bertha, urged an act of Congress enabling them to adopt eight Korean children, generating considerable media coverage and public interest in international adoption. Guided by Christian faith, the Holts quickly returned to Korea on a mission to unite every homeless child with a permanent, loving family in the U.S. They established the Holt Adoption Program in 1956, enabling thousands of children to be nourished to health and placed for adoption in the ensuing years.

Concerned about the children who weren’t adopted, especially those with profound medical and developmental conditions, the Holts built a long-term care facility near the village of Ilsan in 1961. The Ilsan Center has since become a world-renowned residential facility specializing in the care of people with disabilities.

Holt developed its philosophy of care in Korea – a philosophy of affectionate, attentive care to nurture children’s growth and development while they await permanent placement. In 1965, Holt introduced a foster care program founded on this philosophy. In this more family-like alternative to an institution, children thrive in the loving embrace of trained foster parents. Holt proceeded to replicate this model of care in countries we serve throughout the world.

Holt broadened its reach in later years, establishing community centers to serve low-income families in several Korean cities. Here, families receive free meals and medical check-ups, as well as opportunities to gain employment and other life skills. Holt also founded the Family Welfare Research Center, providing a forum for collaborative research on social welfare.

In the 1970s, Holt Children’s Services of Korea (Holt Korea) became a legally separate entity from Holt International. They now serve children and families in Korea as two separate but closely tied organizations.



Current Projects

Since 1955, over 150,000 Korean children have joined families through international adoption. As adoptees grew to adulthood, many expressed the need for continuing support, such as counseling and assistance with birth searches. To meet this growing need, Holt began offering these post-adoption services, as well as adoptee summer camps and motherland tours – enabling adoptees to explore identity and adoption issues as well as connect with fellow adoptees.



Nearly all of the children who need families in Korea have been relinquished by their birth mothers, most of whom choose to keep their identities secret due to the social stigma of unwed motherhood. Children entrusted to Holt are placed in expert, loving foster homes prior to their adoption. Approximately 600 children are in care at any one time, most of whom wait an average of 11 months before joining permanent

families. In the first five months in care, Holt Korea seeks families to adopt domestically, enabling the child to stay within his or her birth culture. Korea, in fact, requires a 5-month waiting period before a child may be placed for ICA.

Child sponsorship helps fund foster care, child care facilities and support for the residents of the Ilsan Center, which continues to demonstrate model care for people with disabilities. Ilsan provides short and long-term rehabilitation and medical care; apartment-style group homes overseen by housemothers; vocational training, such as pottery and sewing; and a K-12 school for children with special needs, including those living outside of Ilsan. Many Ilsan graduates hold jobs at the center or find employment in nearby factories and farms. They often marry and have families of their own.

To prevent child abandonment, Holt Korea began counseling expectant mothers and unmarried couples. Through guidance and support, Holt empowers them to decide whether to parent or relinquish their child. Many of the women who decide to parent stay for one year at one of seven unwed mothers' homes throughout the country, receiving community housing, nutrition, support and skill development. If a mother decides not to parent,

Holt provides her with additional counseling and post-natal care, and places the child for domestic adoption.

Strategic Directions

As the country where our mission began, Korea holds great significance to Holt. Our role in Korea is, however, shifting. As national birthrates have declined over the past decade, fewer and fewer children are entering Holt care. And with greater acceptance and occurrence of domestic adoption, the profile of child available for ICA has changed. More healthy infants are finding homes within Korea. Children who now require ICA to have a permanent family frequently have some degree of special need.

Holt has adapted well to the changing landscape of international adoption, successfully recruiting families for children with special needs. But with the overall need for ICA diminishing, the Korean Government has considered bringing an end to the regular process. To maintain a viable adoption program should the regular process end, Holt is advocating for ICA to continue for children with special needs, as well as by Korean-American families – a placement option many consider equal to domestic adoption.

As the overall rate of ICA declines, our role as an adoption service provider will also diminish. But as a child service organization, our purpose in Korea will become more critical. In the coming years, we will help Holt Korea expand the scope of their work – looking beyond ICA to provide broader child and family welfare services through partnerships with local governments, social welfare agencies, educational institutions and hospitals.

Holt Korea's services will not only expand, but also shift with the dynamics of Korean society, including increasing support for immigrant, guest worker and multi-cultural children and families. As more single mothers choose to parent their children, Holt Korea will provide greater shelter capacity and programs for single parents.

Holt Korea has also undertaken the complete renovation of the Holt Ilsan Center – a five-year project that will require significant fundraising. Holt will strive to underwrite the Ilsan project, work to expand the number of sponsored children, and explore new donor opportunities to support growing child welfare work in Korea.