

AmerAsians: Neither Here Nor There

Bill would naturalize GIs' children

By Benjamin Hu, The Washington Times

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Rep. Lane Evans, Illinois Democrat, the ranking minority member on the House Veterans Affairs Committee, plans to present a citizenship bill this month making children of American soldiers and Asian women eligible for U.S. citizenship.

The Amerasian Naturalization Act of 2003 and other channels of entry already exist for Vietnamese children, but Asian-American advocacy groups say it is not enough. They hope the Evans bill will extend American citizenship to the offspring of U.S. military personnel in four other war-zone countries - South Korea, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, where Americans also served during the Vietnam War.

To many Americans, this is primarily an economic and political issue, but for a generation of children fathered by GIs, it is a big step toward deliverance from a life of racism, discrimination and homelessness.

Millions of American soldiers were stationed in Asian war zones, at front lines in Korea and Vietnam and also in the neighboring regions of Laos, Cambodia and Thailand.

When the fighting ended and the U.S. troops departed, an estimated 150,000 Amerasian children were left behind. John Westover, Chung Kwang Bok and Oh Hung Joo are three such offspring of Americans, all raised in legal obscurity, abandoned by their absentee fathers and shunned by fellow Koreans.

Racial minorities are much more visible in Asia than in the United States, owing to the ethnic homogeneity of most countries there. The CIA World Factbook cites ethnic majorities of 90 percent or more in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. South Korea is even more homogenous - non-Koreans, mostly Chinese, number fewer than one in 2,000. Children with foreign features stand out in a crowd.

Even associating with Americans is enough to stigmatize a woman as "yang gal bo" - Yankee comfort woman. The shame is so deep that many mothers are forced to raise their children in isolation and some abandon them at birth.

"It's important to break the stereotypes that they are children of prostitutes," said John Chun, a Korean-born lawyer who has lobbied for the Evans bill. He says many Korean mothers of GI offspring worked at normal jobs or owned small shops near U.S. military bases.

Mr. Westover's mother owned a clothes shop, and Mr. Chung's mother worked at a dry-cleaning business. Mr. Oh's mother came from a well-to-do family.

Illegitimacy, however, is harder to refute, especially in the absence of the father. The U.S. Army frequently relocates servicemen on short notice and does little to help foreign offspring trace their parents. Even when the father of an Amerasian is known, he may not be alive or willing to be found.

Mr. Chung hopes someday to meet his father - a black soldier who was well-liked by Koreans. Little is known except that his family name was Henry and that he took part in the final hostilities, where he may have died.

Mr. Oh, like most Amerasians, has no information about his father.

Mr. Westover, on the other hand, is among the few who succeeded in finding their fathers. His father and mother separated when he was barely 3 months old. Although his father's military serial number was known, the U.S. Army refused to disclose his identity, so Mr. Westover enlisted a private detective. After 33 years, he was reunited amicably with his father, who had since remarried.

"I wanted to find my roots," he said. "I was so happy to see my father at last, and my four American half sisters." By finding his father, he also found his surname, Westover, and adopted it as his own with evident pride.

The need for a father goes beyond personal curiosity. To this day, Korea uses paternal lineage as the basis for official registry and identification. Without family ties, individuals cannot register for school or other official activities. Marriage can be approved or denied on the basis of one's surname.

Amerasian children who make it into school face constant discrimination by their peers and teachers, and many quit under the pressure. Mr. Westover excelled in English-language studies, but his teachers dismissed his achievements as byproducts of his mixed parentage. He subsequently gave up.

Mr. Oh remembers being mistreated because of his European features.

"The teacher told me that if I did anything wrong, he would make me stand on the table and take off my pants in front of the class," Mr. Oh said. "That did happen once - I think they were curious to find out how different I was."

The social status of a black Amerasian is even lower.

Mr. Chung recalls: "I was very good at baseball and I got a sports scholarship, but they said I was stupid because of it. I was punished for everything I did." South Korean schools still permit corporal punishment.

For Amerasian children, racial tensions often continue at home. Mothers who keep their children often face hostility from relatives who are ashamed of the association. Few marry, and fewer still happily.

After his American father left, Mr. Oh's mother married a Korean, but he never fully accepted his Amerasian stepson.

"Once, I accidentally called him 'abom,' a familiar term for 'father,' " he said. "He was furious and scolded my mother for not raising me properly."

By the age of 13, Mr. Oh asked his mother to offer him up for adoption to a U.S. family. She agreed, but was told on inquiring that only children 10 or younger qualified as war orphans. She died when he was 15, and his stepfather stopped paying for his education and made him leave home two years later.

But Mr. Oh already was luckier than many Amerasians - he had completed high school and was fully literate in Korean. Mr. Chung is one of the few Amerasian to complete a postsecondary degree.

Regardless of schooling, Korean-Amerasians are barred from military service, which is compulsory for all other South Korean males.

"I wanted to enlist," said Mr. Chung. "They said, 'Look at the color of your skin. We don't want people like you.' "

Korean society looks down on men who have not served in the military, regardless of race, but the rejection is especially painful for Amerasian men. Their lack of military service is a further erosion of their Korean identity, and a painful reminder that in their own country, they occupy a lower status than their American fathers.

Lack of a military record also makes it hard to find a job, since many employers ask for service records. Amerasians in Korea often work in temporary construction or factory jobs, or as street vendors.

Even if they find work, they face hostility from colleagues, who sometimes press higher-ups to dismiss Amerasians.

Mr. Oh opened a Korean restaurant after arriving in the United States and continued to face discrimination from ethnic Koreans. His restaurant ultimately failed, and he now runs a construction firm.

The poverty, limited education and social ostracism that faces Amerasian children of GIs lead to suicide rates as high as 42 percent, according to some Korean surveys. All three Korean men acknowledged having seriously considered suicide, and Mr. Westover attempted it once, after his wife left him and their children. Mr. Chung says that the only thing that stopped him from killing himself was hearing about a new U.S. law concerning the forgotten children of American soldiers.

A 1982 act offered permanent residency to Amerasians coming from South Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. However, it made no provisions for their families - especially the mothers, who now faced abandonment by their children after losing their U.S. spouses or partners. Moreover, that law did not bestow citizenship.

This was partly rectified by the 1988 Homecoming Act. It gave citizenship for Amerasians born in Vietnam between 1962 and 1976 and their families. Those born elsewhere were not helped.

Rep. Zoe Lofgren, California Democrat, introduced legislation last year to extend these birth date restrictions, but the Amerasian Naturalization Act of 2003, still under consideration, does not affect non-Vietnamese Amerasians.

The bill to be introduced by Mr. Evans would allow non-Vietnamese Amerasians who meet the terms of the 1982 bill to obtain the citizenship and family provisions of Mrs. Lofgren's proposed bill.

For Mr. Chun, it is a matter of correcting a long-standing error in immigration law, and bringing Amerasians the same entitlements already available to any other child born overseas to a U.S. citizen.

"Lofgren's bill falls short of its noble aims," he said. "We need to include Amerasians from other nations - only then will it be fair and constitutional."

Nguyet Lam is less convinced. Her work with Asian American Lead (Leadership, Empowerment and Development for Youth and Families), a family support group in Washington, promotes parenting skills and children's welfare. For her, the social issue goes beyond questions of immigration, with greater focus on education and domestic violence.

"Citizenship is only one part," she said. "We need to provide support for family counseling and job training. They have suffered much as children, and their suffering continues here."

Mrs. Lam was born in Vietnam, and carries her black heritage clearly in her features. Being black in an Asian country opened her to more discrimination than white children face. Even her relatives were affected.

"They were ashamed to take me anywhere. They didn't want to be seen with a black girl," she said. "But that gave me freedom to go where I wanted to, alone."

Unlike South Korea, a U.S. ally, Vietnam remained strongly anti-American after the communist victory. In 1975, the government disbanded orphanages, leaving many Amerasians on the streets. Throughout school, Amerasians in Vietnam contended with history lessons that vilified their fathers. Universities refused to admit "children of the enemy."

Despite these obstacles, Mrs. Lam got an education.

"Before she died, my mother told my uncle: 'I know she is black, and she is ugly - but please put my daughter through school so she can survive.' "

Mrs. Lam's determination to study caught the eye of a family friend, who felt she would make a good wife for his son. In a patriarchal society where the father's authority is absolute, the son and mother-in-law had to accept his decision.

"My husband didn't want to marry me, and I didn't want to marry him, either," said Mrs. Lam. "The night after the wedding, I told him I knew we didn't love each other, and he could be free to do whatever he wished, except for one thing: I wouldn't let him hit me or beat me."

Domestic violence is a fact of life in many cultures. In families where parents work two or more jobs for a subsistence income, there is a feeling that providing food and education is enough. Mrs. Lam tries to help Amerasian immigrants adjust to American values and rise above their own childhoods.

"I think of our fathers, who left their country to suffer and die for us," she said. "But do they know their children are suffering daily? Can they be happy knowing how we suffer?"

Despite the hardships of living in America, many Amerasians view it as preferable to life back home. In South Korea, after more than 50 years of American presence, the stigma of being Amerasian remains so great that even popular icons such as actress Lee Yu-jin are reluctant to have their parentage known.

"I'm glad that I can admit that I'm Amerasian," said Mr. Chung. "I had to hide it from everybody for my whole life. In America, at least I can tell people who I am."