



COVER STORY

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Photo: Arindam Mukherjee



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In the red light districts of Calcutta, the little invisible ones are living on borrowed time as HIV-Aids is leaving a generation of orphans either doomed from the womb or robbed of their childhood **p42**

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Courtesy of Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine

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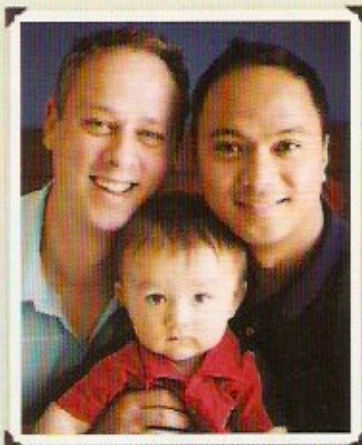
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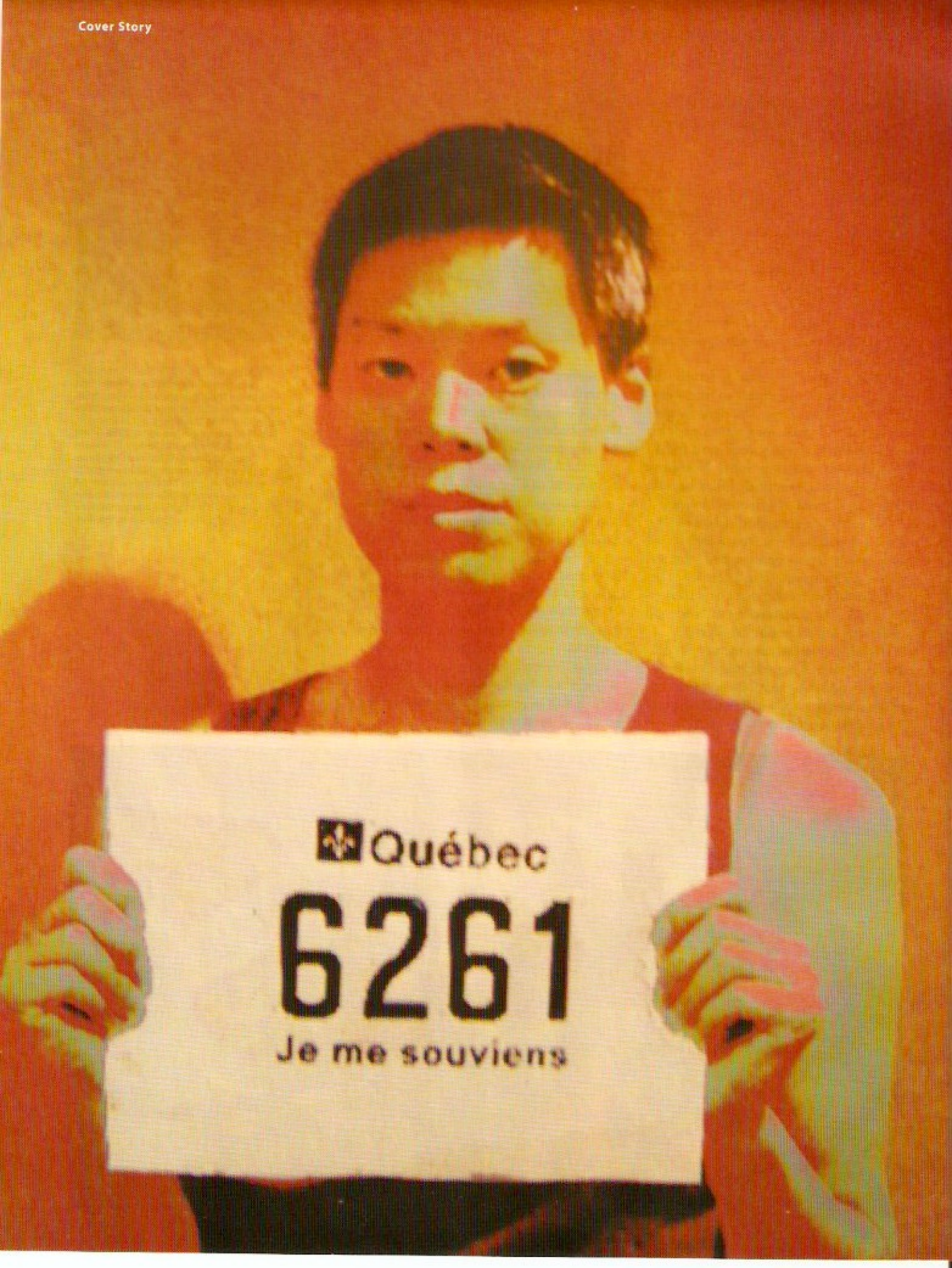
For gays and lesbians, having kids used to be an impossible dream. But thanks to medical advances, two Australian couples are building a brave new family world **p68**


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Today's families no longer make distinctions based on creed, color or country and different cultures can live in harmony – all under one roof **p72**



Courtesy of Jason and Adrian Tuason-McCheyne



 Québec

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Je me souviens

The pros and cons of international adoption

Roots of discontent

On top of the usual angst about growing up, adopted Asians living in the West must also confront racism and a sense of displacement. **Wency Leung** reports

As a child, Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine was skeptical when her adoptive Belgian parents explained that she and her siblings were from South Korea. "We thought they were lying... because we didn't know it was a real country until they showed it to us on a map," Lemoine said, adding that even then, the idea of originating from Korea was too abstract for them to comprehend. "It was only when we were adults that we really believed we were from there."

Lemoine, 39, was about 18 months old when she was put on a plane from Korea to Belgium in 1969. There, she was raised by Caucasian parents who also adopted three other, unrelated Korean children.

Lemoine, who is now an artist living in Montreal, Canada, said it took her a long time to become comfortable with her ethnicity.

"For me, I was not very proud of being an Asian," she says.

But, having spent several years in South Korea and having met her birth family, she has since come to terms with her heritage.

A generation of children who were adopted from Asia into Western families following the Korean and Vietnam wars has entered adulthood. And many are returning to their birth countries to discover their roots and to establish cultural connections.

Some adoptees have set up organizations to share their experiences and help each



FINDING ANSWERS: Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine stands outside the South Korean embassy holding her adoption number. Lemoine traveled to South Korea in 1991 to reunite with her birth mother and discovered that she was given away because her mother, who was then only 16 years old, was unwed at the time she was pregnant.

other find their birth families. Meanwhile, some groups are challenging the practice of international, transracial adoptions.

Unlike in domestic, same-race adoptions, international adoptions involve additional issues of displacement, separating children not only from their birth families, but also from their ethnic communities, says Richard Lee, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Minnesota who studies the development of Korean adoptees.

"In the case of internationally adopted individuals, who are typically adopted as infants, there's always going to be the question at some point of not only, 'Why was I adopted?' but also 'Why was I adopted to another country?'" he says.

Lee says there's little research to determine whether these issues have a positive or negative impact on adopted

children. There's also only a handful of studies comparing domestic and international adoptions. But, he adds, research has shown that even when internationally adopted individuals are raised with all the privileges of being part of an affluent, Caucasian household, they are nonetheless vulnerable to the harmful effects of racism and discrimination in their adopted country.

Modern challenges

Adoption agencies and adoptive families rarely considered this in the past, but are now taking note, Lee says. Some agencies offer seminars to help adoptees and Western families tackle some of the challenges associated with international adoptions.

In Canada, Children's Bridge, an agency based in Ontario, holds mandatory sessions for new adoptive parents, during which adult adoptees from South Korea and Vietnam speak about their experiences regarding race and identity. Today, China is the largest source of children for international adoptions in Canada.

"To pretend that race is not going to matter is not something that we feel is helpful to the child," says Cathy Murphy, director of adoption services at Children's Bridge. "It's very important to recognize that racism, unfortunately, is alive and well in Canada, and that our children will experience racism. It's not a matter of if—it's a matter of when."

JUST A NUMBER: A self-portrait by Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine shows her holding up her adoption number. Lemoine was just 18 months old when she was flown from Korea to Belgium to join her adoptive family. Now an artist living in Montreal, Canada, she grew up with three other adopted unrelated Korean children.

The G.O.A.'L 7th Annual Conference Identity of Adoption

8.11-13 • 장소: 서울여성플라자 • 주최: (사)해외입양인연대 G.O.A.'L • 후원: 서울특별시, 재외동포재단, 보건복지부



▶ At the seminars, many of the adult adoptees, whose adoptive families sheltered them from racism at home, say they were ill equipped to later handle such situations, especially when they moved away for college or university, Murphy says.

In Lemoine's case, she struggled not only with schoolyard taunts about being a "gook", she was also confused by her own adoptive parents' attitudes towards other racial minorities.

Although their comments were not aimed at their Korean children, "they would say, 'Oh, the Chinese, they are so lazy,' and stuff like that," Lemoine says. "It's like a lot of adoptive parents, even though they adopt [children of a different race], it doesn't mean they're not racist."

Lemoine says that while her Asian background troubled her, one source of comfort was that she and her siblings were not as poorly regarded in Belgium as people of African descent at the time. "So in that matter, we thought we were not the worst race in the world," she says, noting that children

adopted these days face much less blatant racism as adoptees of her generation.

Murphy says the seminars offered by Children's Bridge emphasize the need to empower children and prepare them to deal with discrimination nonetheless.

Personal decision

Murphy, who is the mother of two international adoptees aged 11 and 16, says the seminars also encourage adoptive parents to offer opportunities for their children to explore their heritage, and to support them if they want to seek their birth families.

"The adoptive family should not be the barrier. But they should also not be the pushing force if the child is feeling that's not something they're needing to explore at that time," she says.

Murphy notes that there is a common misconception that all adoptees want to reunite with their birth families. She says seeking one's birth family is a personal decision, dependent on the child. About 50% of adoptees placed by Children's

BROTHERS AND SISTERS: Participants pose for a souvenir shot at the Global Overseas Adoptees' Link 7th Annual Conference in Canada last year. The group, which was co-founded by Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine, organizes social gatherings and helps adoptees locate their birth families.

Bridge actually express an interest in tracking their birth parents, she says.

Lemoine was the only one out of the four adopted children in her family to feel compelled to do so. In 1991, she traveled to South Korea for the first time. With French as a first language, Lemoine spoke no Korean and little English at the time. Yet, with the help of Korean-speaking friends, she set out by examining adoption records, visiting orphanages and police stations. Soon, she discovered a couple of startling facts.

First, she was actually three years younger than her officially recorded age. She also found that she was of mixed race—her mother was Korean and her father was Japanese.

"What they say in the [adoption] files, it's a lot of lies," she says.

Once she retraced her origins, Lemoine appeared on Korean television to reach out to her biological parents. A friend of her birth mother saw her on the program, and made the connection. Lemoine says her first meeting with her birth mother was both awkward and emotional.

"When I saw her, I kind of knew it was her, even [though] nobody told me," she says. "When they introduced me, it was like there was nothing really to say because I couldn't speak [the same language], but I looked at her a lot and she looked at me."

"To pretend that race is not going to matter is not something that we feel is helpful to the child. It's very important to recognize that racism, unfortunately, is alive and well in Canada, and that our children will experience racism. It's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when."

“She has her life and I have mine. I didn’t want to change my life for her and I don’t think she has to change her life for me. I felt we met, we understand what happened. She knows I’m alive, I’m happy.”

Finding answers

As her friends helped translate, Lemoine’s mother revealed she was 16 and unwed when she became pregnant. She opted to carry out the pregnancy in secrecy, hoping to give birth to a son.

“If I were a boy, they would have kept me because there’s no male in the family,” Lemoine says.

She says she was glad to finally receive some answers, and appreciated that her birth mother agreed to see her. But their relationship never developed far beyond that initial meeting.

Lemoine says she later relocated to Korea and lived there for 13 years. During that time, she saw her birth mother only two more times. As a gay woman, Lemoine says she felt her birth mother would not understand her sexual orientation.

“She has her life and I have mine,” she says. “I didn’t want to change my life for her and I don’t think she has to change her life for me. I felt we met, we understand what happened. She knows I’m alive, I’m happy.”

Lemoine says she never felt that her biological mother would replace her adoptive one. But even so, she and her adoptive mother were estranged for many years. She is only now in the process of reconnecting with her adoptive family.

“My [adoptive] mother, when I was a child, always told me she would help me [find my biological parents] but, in fact, when it happened, she never helped me,” she says.

Her own experiences have left her with a conflicted view about overseas adoptions. She is an adoptee activist and co-founder of Global Overseas Adoptees’ Link, an organization that helps adoptees locate their birth families.

Lemoine says she understands how overseas adoption secured homes for the

thousands of babies left orphaned or abandoned in the 1950s and 1960s, following the Korean War. But international adoption has become an industry, she says.

By the 1980s, South Korea was still sending thousands of babies abroad each year. Of the hundreds of adoptees she has helped, Lemoine says only about 30% found they had come from poor families.

Social stigma

Contrary to common assumptions in the West, many women do not give up their children out of poverty, but because of social stigma or superstitions, she says. Her own birth mother was not poor; she was young and unwed.

“I think if the Western world doesn’t ask for as many Oriental babies, it wouldn’t be as possible to have [them],” Lemoine says. “It’s like trading.”

Since adoption agencies and adoptive parents are now more aware that they need to help children bridge the cultural divide, some of the challenges Lemoine faced no longer apply today, she says.

But, she adds, source countries need to put more effort into lifting the social stigma

and providing support for unwed mothers to keep their children within their culture.

So Yung Kim, 28, who was adopted from Korea as a baby by a Caucasian couple in the US, opposes international adoptions outright, calling it “another way of buying people”.

Kim, a co-founder of the anti-overseas adoption site Transracialabductees.org, says the adoption industry generates propaganda that children of color are saved through international adoption. She says the argument in favor of the practice has been simplified to promote the notion that children will forever stay in orphanages and foster care unless Western families adopt them.

“It becomes an either/or situation,” she says, noting that alternatives for allowing children to remain in their home country are not explored.

Kim says she is often lambasted for her criticisms of transracial adoption. Hurt and appalled by her views, parents of other adoptees call her “ungrateful”, she says.

Yet in spite of her often-inflammatory public remarks against the practice, she maintains a positive relationship with her own adoptive parents.

To her detractors, she says: “All I can say is, yeah, in a lot of ways, I had a very loving, kind of happy relationship with parents I love... but there’s this other layer, though, that is totally separate... and you have to look at that and think of that.”



Value-added views.

Go to Transracialabductees.org to read some strong views expressed by adopted Asians.



BUYING PEOPLE: Korean So Yung Kim, who was adopted as a baby by a Caucasian couple in the US, opposes international adoption and likens it to buying people. She says the industry generates propaganda that children of color are saved through international adoption. Kim co-founded the anti-overseas adoption site Transracialabductees.org.