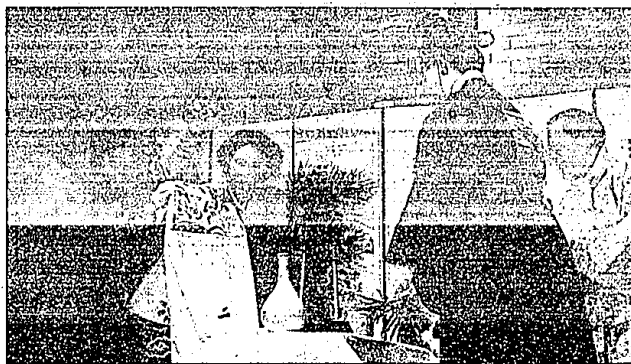




Uplifting voices: Jennifer Chung (above), a 5-year-old Grosse Pointe resident, sings a traditional Korean song at a Korean church in Troy.



Wedding Vows: Newlyweds Tom and Eunjo Yang re-enact their vows in the traditional Korean ceremony. The bride is accompanied by Kson Chung on the left and Hyeja Kim on her right. To the right of the groom is Byung Joon Kim.

Adopted children learn of their Korean heritage

BY TODD WICES
STAFF WRITER

More than 100 adopted South Korean children received a crash course in the culture and practices of their native country last weekend.

On May 17, the Korean United Methodist Church in Troy hosted children and their American families from all over the state at its first cultural exchange program. The event attempted to establish a link to the homeland that most of these Korean-Americans couldn't recall, since they were adopted at too young an age.

"People reach us and ask, 'Where can I get the opportunity for my kids to learn about their heritage?'" said Sun-Hee Lee, an event organizer and Birmingham resident. "Because we are a large Korean congregation, we felt like it was our responsibility to give them access to Korean culture."

The day began with a traditional Korean lunch, including sushi and dishes with seaweed or noodles. Later the families moved through a series of activity stations. As their parents admired antiques and re-creations of settings from a typical Korean house, the children played games and tried calligraphy and kite making.

Events later in the day included demonstrations of a traditional Korean wedding, folk dances, and Tae-Kwon Do.

Invitations for the event went out in a newsletter by Families For Children, a non-profit support group for adoptive parents of Korean kids. The group has held two similar Cultural Exchanges at a Korean church in Ann Arbor.

"A lot of families who have adopted don't have a lot of knowledge of the history, the culture," said Jeff Galloway, director of the Southeastern Michigan branch. "This event is a good way of introducing it."

Galloway, a Korean, was only six months old when an American family adopted him. He now has two adopted Korean children of his own.

"When I was growing up, there was a lot of separation between Korean adoptees and the Korean community," he recalled. "My biggest thing then was self-esteem, fitting in, being called names. At that time, I was ashamed of being Korean."

"(Kids today) should be proud: 'I am a citizen of the United States.' But being Korean is part of

their heritage."

Many of the families in attendance on Saturday knew each other through Families For Children activities. Vickie Labenz and Melody Perrin of Clinton Township cook Korean dishes and regularly do "cultural things" for their adopted kids.

"Because they look Korean, other kids expect them to know about Korea," said Labenz. "This exposes them to a lot of their cultural background that they couldn't get through books."

"A lot of kids assume my kids are Chinese," said Perrin. "Those cultures are very different. They need to know the difference, and what that really means."

Indeed, the Cultural Exchange seemed to be as much for the adoptive parents' benefit as the children's.

"I plan on using this as a resource," said Sharon Fisher of Clarkston, who has two adopted Korean sons. "We talk to them all the time about being adopted, and read books to them about Korea. I think it's very important for them to know their culture."

This year marks the 25th anniversary of Korean United Methodist, with 21 of those years spent at its Dequindre Road location in Troy. According to Rev. Hoon K. Lee, nearly 1,000 first and second-generation Korean immigrants make up the congregation.

Organizers took a survey of guests at the end of the day, and planned to use those responses to see if the Cultural Exchange could become an annual event.

Galloway acknowledged that some adoptive families want nothing to do with Korean culture. "I have adopted brothers and sisters who couldn't care less," he said. "But I always was interested in my background."

"We want the people who are eager to explore," agreed Lee.

"She hoped that the church's guests would remember the church as a potential future resource to learn more about Korean heritage."

"This way, they can get more access to Korean culture if they want to," said Lee. "Today is only for a few hours, they won't get too much out of it. But they'll know who to contact if they want more."



Writing lesson: Sojin Kim of Troy (right) helps one-year-old Hannah Soo-Kyung Burton of Shelby Township write her name in Korean during a cultural exchange program for adopted South Korean children at Korean United Methodist Church in Troy Saturday.

Children observe a Korean folk dance (below). The dance was among the presentations which included Tae-Kwon-Do, a puppet show, kite making, and a Yut play.



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