
Nationalism, Subalternity, and the Adopted Koreans

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Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, more than 160,000 Korean children have been adopted to fifteen Western countries. The United States has taken in two thirds, while the rest are spread out in northwestern Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. During recent years, overseas adopted Koreans have increasingly turned up in various Korean popular cultural works including musicals, comics, pop songs, television dramas, and feature films. This article looks specifically at representations of female overseas adoptees in four Korean feature films: Chang Kil-su's *Susanne Brink's Arirang* (1991), Park Kwang-su's *Berlin Report* (1991), Kim Ki-duk's *Wild Animals* (1997), and Lee Jang-soo's *Love* (1999). At the end, the adopted Koreans are conceptualized as subaltern bodies, once commodified and disposable and now deprived of their voices and turned into mute artifacts of patriarchal nationalist ideology.

International Adoption from Korea and the Korean Adoption Issue

International adoption from Korea originated as a rescue mission after the Korean War, organized by Western individuals and agencies to adopt mixed race children, who were the products of large-scale sexual exploitation caused by massive foreign military presence.¹ Under the authoritarian regimes between 1961 and 1987, when Korea's rapid and brutal modernization process took place, children of young factory workers who were relinquished and abandoned because of urban poverty replaced the war orphans.² International adoption was used as a method of decreasing the numbers in an overpopulated country, as a child welfare practice to avoid costly institutional care, and as a goodwill strategy to develop political ties to and trade relations with important Western allies. Particularly during the 1980s, the military government created a thriving and profitable adoption industry with close to 70,000 international placements, and the Korean adoption agencies were allowed to compete with each other to track down unrestricted numbers of adoptable children. In the 1980s, Korea had accomplished a reasonable economic wealth, and from then on, the children dispatched overseas were increasingly categorized as illegitimate since they were born to middle-class high school or college students.³

In 1988, the Seoul Olympic Games showcased a newly democratized and industrialized Korea to the world. Western journalists suddenly started

to write about the country's adoption program and designated Korea as the leading global exporter of children. The unexpected attention was deeply humiliating and painful for the proud host country, and as a result of the negative foreign media coverage Korean society was finally forced to address the problem in public. Ever since, the adoption issue has been haunting Korea as a recurrent subject in media and popular culture, turning up time and again in editorials and columns, and in such diverse genres as novels and poems, children's books and comics, television dramas and plays, and popular songs and feature films. Still, every year more than 2,000 Korean children leave the country for international adoption, all born at secluded maternity homes belonging to the adoption agencies both to secure a steady supply of healthy infants for an insatiable adoption market in the West and to uphold the norms of a rigid patriarchal system within the country itself.

Representing Adopted Korean Women in Korean Feature Films

The very existence of adopted Koreans threatens Korean patriarchal values, as the adoptees in their Westernized state challenge prescribed Confucian ideals of female chastity. This is the point of departure for my analysis of the four feature films. These readings are based on nationalism studies by Nira Yuval-Davis and other feminist scholars, who argue that modern nation-states are profoundly gendered in the sense that the nation is often embodied as a woman.⁴ The nation imagined as a female body gives rise to strong familial connotations and it becomes the task of male power to rescue and defend her. As international adoption is perceived to intrude upon and disrupt both the nation and the family, especially female adopted Koreans become a matter of strong nationalist concern.

Susanne Brink's Arirang, released in 1991 and directed by respected filmmaker Chang Kil-su, is the most famous of all Korean feature films representing an overseas adoptee in a Western country. The script is based on a true story and depicts the life of Susanne Brink, an adopted Korean woman in Sweden. The narrative trajectory of the film starts with her departure from Korea at the age of three, continues through her hardships as an adoptee in Sweden with an abusive adoptive family, two suicide attempts and endless misery, and concludes with her reunion with her Korean family some twenty years later. As the film follows her sufferings in her abusive adoptive family, Brink takes on the role of the colonized subject and embodies the gendered version of the Korean nation at times of foreign occupation. However, eighteen-year-old Brink ends up a single mother to a mixed-race daughter. Since unwed motherhood is strongly condemned in Korean society, Brink is also violently disgracing the Korean

nation. Accordingly, in *Susanne Brink's Arirang*, Korea performs as a female adopted Korean who simultaneously suffers from colonialism and puts the nation to shame in her shocking violations of Korean femininity. However, one day a Korean television team led by a male journalist who is making a documentary on adopted Koreans in Europe visits Brink in Sweden. It is precisely at the moment when the Korean journalist enters the plot that Korean male power intervenes as the nation's savior. Through the documentary her Korean mother is found and the film ends with mother and daughter embracing each other in front of the journalist. As soon as Brink is reclaimed and re-Koreanized, Korean male power has been regained and the honor of the Korean nation has been restored.

In 1991, the celebrated leftist director Park Kwang-su's *Berlin Report* was released, a film set in Paris. *Berlin Report* circles around Sông-min, a male Korean foreign correspondent who covers a mysterious murder case of a certain Monsieur Bernard, adoptive father to Marie-Hélène, a Korean girl in her early twenties. Marie-Hélène is mentally disturbed and unable to speak, but little by little the correspondent is able to elicit her background story. Monsieur Bernard had adopted Marie-Hélène as a single father and brought her up in a close and reclusive way, and he abused her sexually thereby causing her mental state of aphasia. Marie-Hélène also has an older biological brother, Lucien, who grew up in another adoptive family in France. Lucien tried to reconnect with Marie-Hélène several times but was hindered by her adoptive father; he finally left Paris for Berlin. As the problem of separated families is considered to be one of the most important aspects of the Korean reunification discourse and has become a powerful metaphor of the Korean nation itself, the fate of the film's two siblings is easily turned into a parable of the divided Korean nation.⁵ When Sông-min understands that Marie-Hélène's highest wish is to reunite with her lost brother, he goes to Berlin to look for him, and in the end it turns out that it was Lucien who had killed Marie-Hélène's adoptive father. After many ups and downs, Sông-min finally manages to arrange for the two siblings to meet each other in Berlin. In *Berlin Report*, the divided Korean nation is represented by two separated adopted Koreans longing and searching for each other, and it is only by the resolute intervention of Sông-min, a Korean man, that Marie-Hélène and Lucien are able to reunite with each other.

Kim Ki-duk is notorious for his brutal depictions of the dark underside of modern Korean society, and his 1997 film *Wild Animals*, which takes up the issue of international adoption, is but one example of this. *Wild Animals* is set in Paris and deals with the question of who is a Korean and who belongs to the Korean nation, played out between three ethnic Koreans: South Korean Ch'ông-hae, North Korean Hong-san, and adopted Korean Laura. In the course of the film, the trio repeatedly meet each other in the

French capital, but while Ch'ông-hae and Hong-san develop a fraternal friendship, Laura is unable to take part in their reunification fantasy. As a hybridized subject in Homi Bhabha's sense, Laura is instead rendered different both from the colonizer and the colonized.⁶ Laura is abused by her French adoptive father as well as by her French boyfriend who forces her to perform as an Orientalist fantasy at his sex club, where she is visited by North Korean Hong-san who desires her for displaying what he perceives as a liberated Western sexuality. In her hybridized state, Laura is able to pass as both a Korean and a French woman, but she is also subjected to a double otherization as she is exoticized and sexualized by French and Korean men alike. In the final spectacular scene, Laura kills her South and North Korean compatriots, thereby interrupting their reunification project. In this way the film ends by warning that adopted Koreans are by all means a danger to national unity.

Lee Jang-soo's romantic melodrama *Love* from 1999, set in Los Angeles's Koreatown, is a good example of the relationship between a homeland and its diaspora as it has been theorized by Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc.⁷ They use the term transnationalism, which can be seen as a new form of a community-building on a global level, and in the film, South Koreans and overseas and adopted Koreans also interact in a conspicuously smooth way. The leading character of the film is Myông-su, a male South Korean marathon runner who comes to Los Angeles for a track race. Confused in a foreign country, suddenly he drops out of his team and goes to Koreatown where he has a distant relative named Brad. There he meets Jenny, an adopted Korean who at an early age had run away from her abusive adoptive parents and has grown up as a foster child of Brad. Jenny is portrayed as a reclusive and coldhearted woman unable to initiate any deeper relationship with another human being. However, when Myông-su falls in love with Jenny, his charming Korean masculinity is able to bring her back into life and re-Koreanize her. At the end, Myông-su and Jenny become a couple, and their relationship is turned into both an allegory for the reconciliation between Korea and its adoptees and a utopian vision of a transnational community embracing all ethnic Koreans around the world.

Adopted Koreans as Subaltern Bodies

There is obviously a strong gender aspect to the Korean adoption issue, paralleling the public debate surrounding comfort women. Korean feminists argue that the discourse on comfort women has resulted in the reinforcement of patriarchal nationalism. Comfort women are perceived as having soiled the dignity of the nation, rather than addressing the elusive guilt and complicity of native Korean men who acted as intermediaries to

force, coerce, and trick the women to enlist.⁸ This is analogous with how Korean government and adoption agencies today track down and fly out Korean children for international adoption to Westerners. In this regard, I argue that adopted Koreans together with comfort women can well be seen as subalterns, in Gayatri Spivak's sense, considering the invisibility and unspeakability caused by nationalist feelings of shame and dishonor that surround these two stigmatized groups.⁹ The adopted Koreans simply cannot speak for themselves as they are already represented as mute physical bonds by supplying and receiving governments, as grateful rescue objects by adoption agencies and adoptive parents, and as model adoptees by adoption researchers. Besides, if someone must be considered subaltern within Korean society, given the fact that both the adopted Koreans and the comfort women, at least recently, have actually started to come out and raise their voices, it must be the adoptee's biological parents. Indeed, in her celebrated essays, Spivak mentions female factory workers in Korea as examples of subalterns; the group which by far provided the most children during the heydays of international adoption from Korea from the early 1960s to the mid-1980s.

In the four feature films examined, internal and repressed Korean anxieties and taboos are projected on the bodies of the female adopted Koreans who once were disposable commodities exported out of the country and now are expected to take on the burden of representing the gendered Korean nation. Wherever they live and whatever their conditions are, adopted Koreans suffer from having been abandoned and exiled, and are subjected to racism and abusive behavior coming from their adoptive families and their significant others. Above all, adopted Koreans desperately yearn for being reunited and reconnected with Korea, Korean culture, and Korean people. They just wait passively to be helped and taken care of by the resolute intervention of Korean male power, as they are completely victimized and lack agency. However, to be rescued and saved by, above all, domestic, diasporic, or expatriate Korean men, the adoptees need first to be decontaminated and de-Westernized, disciplined and regulated according to Korean norms, and re-Koreanized before they are able to rejoin the Korean nation and enjoy the secure protection of Korean male power.

NOTES

¹Helen Miller, "Korea's international children," *Lutheran Social Welfare* 13 (Summer 1971), 12-23.

²Youn-Taek Tahk, "Intercountry adoption program in Korea: Policy, law and service," in *Adoption in Worldwide Perspective. A Review of Programs, Policies*

and *Legislation in Fourteen Countries*, ed. René A. C. Hoksbergen (Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger, 1986), 79–91.

³Rosemary C. Sarri, Yeonoak Baik, and Marti Bombyk, "Goal Displacement and Dependency in South Korean-United States Intercountry Adoption," *Children and Youth Services Review* 20, nos. 1–2 (1998): 87–114.

⁴See, for example, Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Nira Yuval-Davis, and Floya Anthias, eds., *Woman-Nation-State* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 1989); and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997).

⁵Roy Richard Grinker, *Korea and its Futures: Unification and the Unfinished War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); and Sheila Miyoshi Jager, "Women, resistance and the divided nation: The romantic rhetoric of Korean reunification," *Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 1 (1996): 3–21.

⁶Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁷Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-states* (Amsterdam: Gordon & Breach, 1994).

⁸You-Me Park, "Comforting the nation: 'Comfort women,' the politics of apology and the workings of gender," *Interventions* 2, no. 2 (2000): 199–211; and Hannah Yang, "Re-membering the Korean military comfort women: Nationalism, sexuality and silencing," in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁹Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988), 271–313.
