

# Imagining a global Koreatown: Representations of adopted Koreans in Sky's music video *Eternity* and Lee Jang-soo's feature film *Love*

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For many years, it was more or less taken for granted that the absolute majority of diasporas had continued to harbour hope of return to their homelands in some distant future. Moreover, it was said that they had maintained their collective group identity and an isolated attitude towards and, at best, a polite relationship with their host societies. This old meaning of how a diaspora is defined and conceptualised was, of course, governed and influenced by the example of the most ancient and generic one, and for many considered to be the ideal type of a diaspora, namely the Jewish diaspora before the foundation of the state of Israel. However, since the colonial world order of European empires imploded after World War II, and the refugee crisis that broke out after the end of the Cold War when globalisation became the talk of the town in Western academia, the field of diaspora studies exploded with buzzwords such as cosmopolitanism, sojourning, expatriation, networking, travelling, exile, and migrancy, and it has now become commonplace to argue that diasporised groups, with their hybrid conditions and multilocational subjectivities, pose a serious challenge to nationalist identities based on cultural stability and territorial unity (Brah, 1996; Clifford, 1994; Cohen, 1997; Hall, 1990; Papastergiadis, 2000; Safran, 1991; Sheffer, 1986, 2003). While many have focused on the inevitable tension between a homeland and its diaspora as well as the immensely complicated relationship between a diaspora and its host country, others have highlighted various diasporas lacking a clear definable homeland, including such classical groups as the Armenians and the descendants of African slaves in the Americas and Europe, but also Kurdish and Sikh refugees and ethnic Asians in the US, among whom a new specific Asian diasporic pan-ethnic consciousness and awareness is said to have emerged (Axel, 2002; Brubaker, 2005; Chow, 1993; Gilroy, 1993; Lowe, 1996; Tuan, 1998; Wahlbeck, 1999).

Not surprisingly, given the sheer number of diaspora studies and diaspora scholars, there are many different suggestions as to what a diaspora actually means. Despite an antagonism between old and new conceptions of a diaspora and different ideas among researchers of what

a diaspora consists of beyond a 'homing desire' and a collective identity, all are likely to agree that in the age of the erosion of the nation state, the expansion of global capital, and also capitalist crises, massive refugee movements, and transnational electronic mediation, diasporas do matter and play an important role in the international political arena. For example, they send remittances back to their families and extended kin (this phenomenon is associated most with 'Third World' diasporas), invest in the economy of their country of origin (the Indian and Chinese diasporas), support various political struggles and agendas in the 'old country' (the Irish diaspora), and create militant and revolutionary networks among each other (the Islamist diaspora). Lastly, while many like to see a clearly discernable liberating potential in diasporas beyond modernist nation states, others argue that the asymmetric power relations between a diaspora, a homeland and a host country are easily overlooked and ignored and that the concept of diaspora itself instead functions to revitalise essentialist identities and cannot transcend entities such as ethnicity, race, gender, or class. In her examination of uncritical valorisations of the term diaspora, Floya Anthias (1998) concludes by warning:

'Diaspora' has turned the gaze to broader social relations that can encompass politics, economy and culture at the global, rather than national level. It pays attention to the dynamic nature of ethnic bonds, and to the possibilities of selective and contextual cultural translation and negotiation. However, the lack of attention to issues of gender, class and generation, and to other inter-group and intra-group divisions, is one important shortcoming. Secondly, a critique of ethnic bonds is absent within diaspora discourse, and there does not exist any account of the ways in which diaspora may indeed have a tendency to reinforce absolutist notions of 'origin' and 'true belonging'.

As will be evident, Anthias's cautious comment has a direct bearing on the Korean case. The present study is limited solely to the context of the Republic of Korea, commonly known as South Korea, and any references to its northern neighbour, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, will be stated explicitly as North Korea, North Korean, or North Koreans as appropriate. Furthermore, the main focus of this study is the specific view of a homeland's conception of its diaspora, and as such it differs from the majority of works in diaspora studies which most often look at the perspective of the diaspora and its relationship to the country of origin. Among the case studies that have a homeland perspective and thus are relevant to this study, Hans-Åke Persson (2000) discusses the two classical examples of a homeland having a conscious policy towards its diaspora, namely Germany and Israel. Both states apply *jus sanguinis*, the right of blood, as the way to define who is a German and who is a Jew and who can gain citizenship of the respective nation states. During the Nazi regime the mobilisation of the *Volksdeutschen* (ethnic Germans living outside the *Reich*) was a vital part of Hitler's diaspora policy, while immigration has been Israel's *raison d'être* in the nation-building project of the Jewish state. This *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil (homeland)) ideology is also a strong component in Korean nationalism.

Bengt Kummel (1994) analyses how the pan-Swedish (*allsvensk*) movement a century ago tried to create a worldwide Swedish community based on common race and language, and

comprising ethnic Swedes in Sweden, Finland and Estonia, and emigrés in North America. The movement, which initially received a lot of attention and support from nationalist elite circles in Sweden, died out in the 1920s as a consequence of changed conditions in Finland and Estonia after World War I and the rapid assimilation of Swedes in America. Such a vision of a worldwide pan-ethnic community is highly present in the Korean case as well. Aihwa Ong (1999, pp. 55–83) studies how globalisation is changing the concept of Chineseness among Chinese overseas communities (*buaren*) in the USA and Southeast Asia. Ong scrutinises China's diaspora policy and the construction of a disembedded global Chinese public in cyberspace, which she interprets as being based on race as well as being principally driven by economic interests. The notion of Greater China (*Da Zhonghua*) as a global Chinese community that has evolved since the late 1980s has become the blueprint for the Korean diaspora policy. Similarly, Giles Mohan and A.B. Zack-Williams (2002) have tried to understand the development potential of diasporised Africans for those who remain on the continent linked to the process of globalisation and the evolution of racialised capitalism. The hope of receiving investments from emigrants and economic expansion overseas are also important incentives for Korea's plan for globalisation.

One study of how a homeland imagines a specific section of its diaspora is Yuh Ji-Yeon's (2002) treatise on Korean military brides in the US. Yuh looks at images of such wives of American servicemen in Korean television documentaries and newspaper articles. The women are simultaneously seen as victims of the American dream, suffering from acculturation problems and isolated from the mainstream Korean-American community, and too Westernised, having almost forgotten their first language and culture. Another work is Arnold Barton's (1994: 187–209) study of representations of Swedish-Americans in Swedish films, fiction and popular culture. Barton identifies how the countrymen in exile are portrayed as self-important and pompous, which according to his interpretation is a reflection of a mixture of jealousy and contempt. Another study worth mentioning in this context is Zeynep Kilic Özgen's (1997) work on representations of diasporic Turks in Europe in Turkish newspapers. Kilic Özgen observes how these images have changed over time, and how newspapers belonging to different interest groups in Turkish society represent the diaspora in different ways, while at the same time nationalism is ever-present regardless of political leanings.

Regarding the Korean nation and its diaspora, the modern exodus of Korean people began in 1860 when the Chosôn Dynasty began to crumble, caused by the outbreak of famine and impoverished conditions in the northern provinces (Lee, 2000, pp. 6–13).<sup>1</sup> Emigrants in the first wave of migration found their way to the Russian Far East territory bordering present-day North Korea, and from 1869 Koreans started to pour into Chinese Manchuria in great numbers. From the 1880s, Korean students started to go over to Japan, and in 1903 emigration to the US was initiated in the form of indentured labour. These four countries, Russia (later the Soviet Union and Central Asia), China, Japan, and the US, still remain the most important host countries, where 90% of the Korean diaspora is located (Lee Kwang-kyu, 1993). Emigration continued during the colonial period, and went on throughout the period of authoritarian regimes, creating a diaspora which today numbers 4.5–5 million people located in 151 different countries: 2 million *Chosônjok* (*Chaoxianzu*) in China, 1 million Korean-

Americans (*chaemi kyop'o*) in the US, 700,000 *Zainichi* Koreans in Japan, 500,000 *Koryô saram* in Central Asia, 200,000 adopted Koreans, and tens of thousands of others located in Canada, Russia, South America, West and Southeast Asia, and Europe.<sup>2</sup>

Several of the various diasporic groups of Korean ethnicity, such as the thousands of Korean workers who were conscripted to work in the mines of Sakhalin and the forcefully relocated Soviet Koreans who ended up in Central Asia in 1937, may well fit into Robin Cohen's (1997, pp. 31–56) category of a victim diaspora, defined as an involuntary dispersal caused by catastrophic and traumatic events such as mass poverty, labour mobilisation, forced transportation, severe persecution, and refugee movements. Cohen uses the Jewish, African, Armenian, and Palestinian diasporas as case studies and ideal types of victim diasporas, and even if many Koreans undoubtedly left their country voluntarily, as Song Changzoo (1999) reminds us, any part of the Korean diaspora that immediately qualifies itself as being in this category must be the adopted Koreans.<sup>3</sup> Finally, in an international perspective, the Korean diaspora can quantitatively and demographically be compared well to the classical Chinese, Indian, Jewish, Italian, Armenian, or Irish diasporas, as it accounts for 8 per cent of the entire global Korean population, and furthermore it is also included in *The Penguin Atlas of the Diasporas* (Chaliand & Rageau, 1997).

According to Yi Hyông-kyu (1999) and Yoon In-Jin (2002, who both have studied the history of the Korean diaspora policy, the issue of overseas Koreans was raised for the first time on a governmental level already in 1971. However, during the Cold War, the South Korean state was possibly even more caught up and encapsulated in a siege mentality than its northern neighbour, accusing emigrants of being unpatriotic and mentioning betrayals to the nation. Consequently, the North Korean diaspora policy and its vision of a *Koryô* federation encompassing all ethnic Koreans worldwide who are still officially eligible for citizenship under North Korean law was much more pronounced in the 1970s and 1980s, and was particularly well received among ethnic Koreans in Japan, China and the Soviet Union and exiled dissidents in North America and Western Europe. Nevertheless, after the end of the Cold War and from the mid-1990s, the huge and widely scattered Korean diaspora has come to play a part in the country's globalisation drive. In 1995, president Kim Young Sam launched Korea's globalisation drive (*segzehwa*) and announced a blueprint for how it was to be achieved (Alford, 1999; Committee for Globalization Policy, 1998; Ha, 1999; Segzehwa Ch'ujinwiwônho, 1998; Yi Jeong Duk, 2002):

Globalization must be underpinned by Koreanization. We cannot be global citizens without a good understanding of our own culture and tradition. Globalization in the proper sense of the word means that we should march out in the world on the strength of our unique culture and traditional values. Only when we maintain our national identity and uphold our intrinsic national spirit will we be able to successfully globalize. (Alford, 1999, p. 153)<sup>4</sup>

Gi-wook Shin (2003) calls this development the paradox of Korean globalisation in his attempt to understand how globalisation is strengthening nationalism in the country. Others

argue that this phenomenon is an international feature for postcolonial nation states in particular as a politics of identity and a resistance strategy against Westernisation (Hall, 1996; Kang, 1999; Park Chan-Seung, 1999; Smith, 1995). One important aspect of this Korean version of globalisation, openly drawing on the Chinese, Indian, Jewish, and Irish examples, is the formulation of a conscious diaspora policy towards the for very many years despised and discarded ethnic Koreans overseas. In 1997, the Overseas Koreans Foundation (*Chaeoe tongp'o chaedan*) was inaugurated as the government body for dealing with the overseas brethren (*chaeoe tongp'o*), who are officially defined as human resources and national assets in the country's globalisation plan (Cheong, 2003; Lee Jeanyoung, 2003). The ingredients in this recently initiated Korean community building and ethnic mobilisation on an international level include: holding of conferences and events such as the World Ethnic Korean Festival (*Segye hanminjok ch'ukchôn*) (from 1989); publication of newsletters and magazines (*Chaeoe tongp'o Sinmun*); organising visits and educational programmes; putting together information databases and directories; networking among businessmen and community leaders, artists, film-makers, and authors; the creation of a cyber community on the Internet (*Hanminjok Network*), including a dating service; and financing immigrant Korean schools and associations.

## The Korean experience of globalisation

The aim of this study is to examine how the above-mentioned diaspora context is articulated in two popular cultural representations of overseas-adopted Koreans, namely the rock band Sky's song *Eternity* (1999) and Lee Jang-soo's feature film *Love* (1999), focusing on the emergence of a global Korean community. Considering the ethnic character of Korean nationalism, with its notion of the nation as family and its strong emphasis on homogeneity, the point of departure is the very existence of the adopted Koreans as a delicate threat to nationalist ideology, causing anxieties about disruptions to a supposedly homogenous national identity, and calling into question what it means to be Korean and who belongs to the Korean nation. What are the implications for a nation depicting itself as one extended family and which has sent away so many of its own children, and what are the reactions from a culture emphasising homogeneity when encountering and dealing with the adopted Koreans?

The happy and beautiful memories together with you – Are not only the time that has passed by chance – (break down) – The master of my empty place which already has widened – Was you, who is the only one existing in the world – (it is you) – It was always as it has been – Just because I waited for you to approach me – In a world without you – To wake up in the morning alone is too hard – Until now there is only one reason for me to breath – As the path that I have been walking was not easy – As my love that always has been – Only tears are left – It seems that it can only be achieved if I owe much – Now I know the way of living, what the world hopes – For me to change my life again to be able to meet you – I will not forget – I will always wait – When the sky is calling – I will take with me the

memory of our eternal love – If we meet again in this world where only seduction exists – I will say that I did not know because I was born the first time – I promise.<sup>5</sup>

The most famous adoption song performed by a Korean music group up to date is without doubt Sky's *Eternity* from the group's 1999 debut album *Final Fantasy. The best is yet to come*. The extremely costly film version of the song was elected Korea's best music video of the year, and includes some of Korean cinema's most popular and talented representatives in its cast. Produced by film director Cho Seung Woo, the music video uses the form of an action film to tell the dramatic story of how two brothers are separated and adopted by two different families in Canada, and how their lives become fatally intertwined with each other some 20 years later. The famous actors Jang Dong Gun and Cha In-pyo star as the two brothers, and Kim Kyuri, known from several horror films, acts as an immigrant Korean woman and the girlfriend of one of them, while Jeong Jun Ho plays another immigrant Korean in the film. Given its extraordinary star cast, music critics had problems with categorising the blockbuster video in a genre. The film was screened repeatedly on Korean television at the end of 1999 when the album was released.<sup>6</sup> Sky had a big hit with *Eternity*, but disbanded in the following year without producing another album.

*Eternity's* lyrics first appear to tell the ordinary story of a relationship that has broken down, an almost a compulsory element of any sort of popular music in general. Regardless, in relation to the music video it is not difficult to grasp that this must be some kind of a final letter from the criminal brother to his girlfriend just before he dies. The rock ballad *Eternity's* sad melody is beautifully introduced by an orchestra consisting of 30 musicians, and the song skilfully blends hardcore, heavy metal and rap in order to illustrate the rapidly changing events taking place during the seven dramatic minutes of the film. After brief footage of the notorious 1988 cover of the American left-liberal journal *The Progressive*, portraying an adopted Korean baby bathing in dollar bills, to remind the Korean audience of the shameful and humiliating adoption industry, *Eternity* starts at Vancouver international airport with two newly arrived children adopted from Korea at the age of approximately four or five years. The biological brothers are holding Canadian flags in their hands, and are accompanied by a female Korean escort and a female Canadian adoption agency worker affiliated to the Holt adoption agency. Against their will and violently resisting, the brothers are split up between two different adoptive families.

Approximately 20 years later, as young adults, one brother has become a depressed criminal belonging to an ethnic Korean gang, while the other is an aspiring police agent in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). The criminal brother is implicated in a series of contract killings related to illegal trade in weapons, while the other brother is investigating these events. In the beginning, two other ethnic Koreans are introduced: a Korean immigrant woman working at a Korean restaurant in Vancouver's Koreatown, and one of the gang members who is the best friend of the criminal brother. The gang member is captured at an early stage by the 'police' brother, and questioned about the contract killer's whereabouts, but even though he is beaten up he remains silent and loyal to the criminal brother. Between the interrogations, the police brother sits in his office looking at the adoption photo on his desk of himself and his

unknown brother. He decides to try to locate him, and puts up posters on the streets. By chance, the criminal brother passes by without noticing the message on the posters.

After the criminal brother has executed yet another contract killing, flashbacks from his childhood occur about the time when his Canadian adoptive father was killed in a robbery at a gas station. He has a nervous breakdown caused by the painful memories and his ruined and wrecked life, and tries to commit suicide by shooting himself in Vancouver's Stanley Park. At this point the Korean immigrant woman turns up and saves him at the last minute, discovers that he is a Korean adoptee, and starts to take care of him and tries to make him stop his self-destructive life course. She also finds the adoption photo of him and his brother in his wallet. At the same time, the police brother continues to put up posters on the walls searching for his lost biological brother. The criminal brother carries out yet another murder, and the police brother is closing in on him by visiting his Korean girlfriend. The criminal brother drives by, sees the police and is able to escape, and believing that he has been betrayed by his friend in the gang, he tries to take out revenge by attempting to kill him, but fails. In the course of the film, in his disloyal, violent and uncontrollable behaviour, the criminal brother appears to be a good example of what could be called a Barthesian myth of the orphan, the classical trope of the destroyed and disturbed abandoned child, illegitimate bastard, foster child, or adoptee sowing madness, misery and mystery around him or her, as is frequently found in literary texts (Novy, 2001).

When the girlfriend is under interrogation by the police brother, she sees the same adoption photo as the one she found in the wallet on his desk and immediately realises the terrible tragedy that is about to unfold. Upon release, her boyfriend's former friend abducts her, as he in his turn is seeking revenge after the murder attempt. Together with another gang member, he demands a ransom from the criminal brother to secure her release. They meet at an appointed place, but the meeting degenerates into a quarrel and they end up pointing guns at one another. The police are called in and arrive in full force, including the police brother who tries to intervene in the locked situation. In a final dramatic shooting, the police brother unknowingly kills his own sibling, and when the girlfriend arrives to the scene and shows him the adoption photo he suddenly understands what he has done. In the next scene, the police brother and the Korean immigrant woman stand in front of the grave of the criminal brother, and the video ends at the same airport which the siblings arrived at as adoptive children as the surviving brother is about to leave for Korea. The very last sequence shows a small girl arriving from Korea for adoption, holding a Canadian flag, who first smiles and then starts to cry. Through this last anti-adoption shot, Sky's music video *Eternity* is turned into an open political statement on the Korean adoption issue, conveying the message that more miserable fates and fatal misunderstandings await among Korea's numerous unfortunate adoptees.

The appearance of adopted Koreans in this work and in Korean popular culture in general can be interpreted as a reflection of the existence of Arjun Appadurai's (1996) ethnoscape, one of several transcultural flows in his theory of global cultural politics in late modernity. Appadurai grounds his theory on the interconnection between electronic mediation and mass migration, which produce what he calls a diasporic public sphere known as the global ethnoscape. The global ethnospace is defined as the shifting and translocal landscape of deterritoria-

lised diasporas and exiles and displaced migrants, which have become the building blocks of imagined worlds and communities – as national identities are constructed and organised on a worldwide level today. Media and popular culture today are not only used to imagine a nation but also the wider space beyond its borders, and thus they have become a vehicle for global identity politics and community-building projects. This especially concerns non-Western nations who often seem to experience globalisation and the outside world through mediated images of their own diasporas.

From the 1990s, overseas as well as adopted Koreans have also undoubtedly turned up more frequently in Korean media and popular culture compared to in earlier decades. Two concrete examples are the sports icon Park Chan Ho, a Korean national who plays in professional American baseball leagues, and who according to Rachel Miyoung Joo (2000) has turned into a site for the constitution of a Korean-American subjectivity as well as a mass mediated spectacle for imagining a diasporic Korean nation in his homeland, and the golf star Michelle Wie, a second-generation Korean-American whose different media portrayals in Korea and in the US reflect the differences between Korean ethnic nationalism and American civic nationalism (Yang Young-Kyun 2004). Korea's leading playwright Oh Tae-sok's play *Love with Foxes* (1996) is another example of this development where Chinese, Japanese, and North and South Koreans interact together and, according to feminist theatre critic Shim Jung-Soon (2002), create an imagined community of pan-Koreanness. Similarly, in *Eternity*, it is not white Canada and Vancouver that is in focus, but Koreatown and the ethnic Koreans who inhabit it, including the adoptees. In other words, Sky's *Eternity* is a perfect example of the Korean way of globalisation experienced and imagined through mediated representations of its diaspora, a phenomenon which is even more accentuated in the film *Love*.

## Visiting the overseas brethren

The month of September 1999 opened up with Lee Jang-soo's romantic melodrama *Love*, a feature film set entirely in Los Angeles' Koreatown.<sup>7</sup> The director came from the glamorous world of Korean television dramas with productions such as *Beautiful Days* (*Arûmdaun naldûl*) (2001) in which two orphans play leading roles, *Shoot for the Stars* (*Pyôrûl ssoda*) (2002), and *Stairway to Heaven* (*Ch'ôngugûi kyêdan*) (2003), and *Love* is still his first and only feature film. The adoption issue frames the narrative, and scriptwriter Song Chi-na explains on the special feature section of the DVD version that she wanted to convey a meaningful message about an urgent social problem through the film. The release of the film coincided with the beginning of the so-called Korean wave (*hallyu*) of Korean feature films and television dramas, which hit the East and Southeast Asian region with full force in approximately the year 2000, when Korean popular culture suddenly became fashionable among non-Korean audiences. The phenomenon of the Korean wave has been exploited to the fullest extent by the Korean Government to bolster trade and tourism and even political relations, and the Korean popular culture industry has therefore received strong support from the Korean nation state when it comes to producing and disseminating films and dramas in particular.

The leading character of *Love* is Myông-su, a professional Korean marathon runner and former Olympic gold medal winner, performed by the tall and athletic Jung Woo-sung who comes to Los Angeles to take part in the city's famous marathon race. Suddenly he drops out of his team and goes to Koreatown where he has a relative named Brad, played by Park Cheol. There he meets Jenny, an adopted Korean played by the television drama actress Ko So-young, who at an early age had run away from her adoptive parents and has grown up as a foster child of Brad. In the end, Myông-su and Jenny become a couple, and even if *Love* is nothing other than an ordinary and somewhat pathetic romantic tale, the film received a lot of attention in the media before and in connection with its release for its original music compositions, unusual location, and expensive budget with several high-paid Korean-Americans and Americans in the cast, and most of all because of the two leading actors' enormous popularity in Korea, which in both cases was firmly established by playing together in Kim Seong-su's box-office hit *Beat* (1997).<sup>8</sup> Yet beyond its simple story, in *Love* the boundaries between South Korean Myông-su and adopted Korean Jenny become increasingly perforated and blurred in the course of the film, turning their relationship and love between one another into an allegory for a global community of ethnic Koreans.

At the moment when Myông-su leaves the exit gate at the airport in Los Angeles, he is met by a welcoming party consisting of Korean-Americans, white Anglos, non-white Hispanics, and representatives from other ethnic groups, causing him to feel instantly confused as he is used to the much more racially and ethnically homogenous Korea. This confusion follows Myông-su during his stay in Los Angeles, probably the most 'thirdworldised' city in the Western hemisphere after the implosion of the colonial world order and massive postcolonial migration. The Korean team members are immediately subjected to a ruthless regimentation and training programme, and forced to run alongside galloping horses in the deserts of California. Myông-su and his best team-mate Kyông-chôl, played by Lee Beom Su, both come from poor backgrounds and they regard their careers as marathon runners as their only viable future. They met when attending school as young teenagers, and Myông-su acts as a role model and a big brother to Kyông-chôl as he is the more successful of the two. However, in the foreign setting Myông-su starts to doubt his own capability and confidence in himself. Above all, he questions his choice in life as up until then he had given up everything for his sports career, including having friends and creating his own family. At night, ignoring the desperate protests coming from his friend who has placed all his hopes for a better future on their comradeship, Myông-su promptly leaves the camp and defects.

Alone in the big city, Myông-su remembers that he has a distant cousin in Los Angeles, Ki-chôl, and decides to call him. The cousin, who prefers to be called Brad, invites him to his house in Koreatown, and his foster daughter Jenny collects Myông-su. In the evening, when they share 'real Korean food' cooked by Brad, he is introduced to Jenny who, says Brad mysteriously, is adopted just like himself, either alluding to his own adoption of American culture or the fact that he is an overseas adoptee too. The director does not reveal Brad's true state as the character acts as a kind of mystic intermediary between all of the different ethnic groups in the film, Korean-Americans and other immigrants, adopted Koreans, and South Koreans. In

his angel-like, kind-hearted and totally altruistic personality it is also easy to have the feeling that he actually never existed at all.

Hereafter, the film narrative is almost over-explicitly concerned with the marking of ambiguous difference and contradictory sameness between Myông-su and Jenny, the South Korean and the adopted Korean. To take an example, while Jenny asks for salt for the 'real Korean food', thereby signifying her upbringing in an Anglo-American home with the background of the practical indivisibility between Korean ethnicity and Korean food, Brad comments that Americans eat salt much more often than Koreans, and then Myông-su also wants more salt to show them that he is willing to adjust to the American way of life. On the other hand, all three speak Korean among each other, and it is therefore impossible to discern from speech alone who is a domestic and who is an adopted Korean. Their common physical sameness is, of course, apparent in a Western surrounding, and this obvious fact is a confusing factor in relation to their equally obvious cultural differences in this hybrid space of Koreatown, particularly for Myông-su.

The appearance of overseas and adopted Koreans in *Love* reflects a newly awakened interest in the Korean diaspora, which is closely connected to Korea's way of globalisation. Terming the 21st century the 'diaspora age', the aforementioned Overseas Koreans Foundation also includes adopted Koreans as a part of the Korean diaspora. From the mid-1990s, adoptees have also been increasingly perceived and treated as ethnic Koreans overseas, as they are regularly mentioned and included in works dealing with the worldwide diasporic community of Koreans, something that was seldom the case during the preceding decades (Chôn, 1995, pp. 289–302; Pak, 1995, pp. 155–171; Research Institute for International Relations, 1996; Research Institute for National Unification, 1993; Sin, 2000, pp. 17–20).<sup>9</sup> In 1996, the Ministry of Unification published the encyclopaedic 10-volume *Koreans in the World* (*Sëgyëui hanminjok*) as a form of complete guide to overseas Koreans for Korean politicians, diplomats and officials, and again adopted Koreans were included. Even if this new attitude sends out signals that Korea has not forgotten the group, and acknowledges them as having a visible place in Korea's modern and troublesome history, it is important to point out that this way of conceptualising adopted Koreans is clearly in opposition to Western theorists who most probably would object to defining the group as neither a diaspora nor an ethnic group in a classical meaning, lacking everything from a myth of a return to the homeland, to a common language and any serious attempts to endogamy. Instead, in the West, international adoptees from non-Western countries are generally regarded as having left behind any traces of their cultural origin, as well as being cut off from both 'their' homelands and diasporas.

The Korean approach rather appears to be to reject the classical conception of a diaspora modelled on the Jewish example, and instead relies on the broadest and perhaps most vulgar and popular definition at hand, namely those segments of people who have ended up outside their traditional home territories, whether as individuals or as collectives, and whether voluntarily or involuntarily. With this wide and inclusive approach, for good or bad it also becomes obvious that earlier notions of an ethnic or racial minority or a group of exiles or migrants today often are summed up in and supplemented or even replaced by the notion of diaspora. Through this Korean interpretation of a diaspora, the adopted Koreans are automatically

essentialised into overseas brethren, thereby disregarding the fact that normally they do not have any connection at all with either Korea or things Korean, and not with any overseas Korean community. Another example of this relativistic and particularistic way of challenging Western universalism is the indigenous theory of *minjung* which Korean social scientists created in the 1970s and 1980s instead of relying on classical Western Marxism to better understand the social forces of modern Korean history. The same tendency is, according to Kang Myung Koo (2004), visible in Korean feminist and cultural studies, where there is a trend to indigenise Western theories or rely on Indian subaltern studies, which in turn means that Western social science models and concepts are oftentimes challenged or even discarded.

## The transnational Korean community

In the film *Love*, Brad manages his own private laundry business, and Myông-su assists him and Jenny in the hot and steaming milieu. At the laundry, to his amazement he finds a Latin American couple (employed by Brad) who speak fluent Spanish with them, and furthermore the customers represent a wide variety of ethnicities. Even more puzzling for Myông-su is that Brad runs his own service for adopted Koreans in an attempt to locate their biological parents in Korea by calling police offices and adoption agencies from his office. One day at the laundry, Myông-su overhears Jenny speaking to an unknown woman in Korea and understands that she is also searching for her Korean mother. She has learnt by heart to describe her appearance, including scars and birthmarks, as well as her adoption story – that she was adopted at the age of four years from a place called Pyonghwa orphanage – and this is repeated throughout the film as a kind of a mantra to remind of her yearning for Korea and her Korean mother.

Myông-su is fascinated by Jenny's enigmatic personality, and moved by her longing as he finds her crying alone at night, and soon he deeply falls in love with her. Jenny, on the other hand, simply ignores his existence and prefers to stay in her own reclusive world. Like so many other adopted Koreans in Korean popular culture, Jenny is a lonely, asocial and cold person bordering on the autistic, and seemingly unable to feel affection towards other people. When Jenny and Myông-su go shopping together, and Myông-su is unable to understand what the cashier is saying and causes irritation among the other customers, Jenny does not even come to his help and could not care less about him. She likes to sing melancholic and sad Korean pop ballads, always looking sour and barely speaking a word, and stays up alone at night, obsessed by nurturing a small Rose of Sharon (*mugunghwa*) plant, which is planted in Korean soil and was given to her as a gift from Korea. As this is Korea's official national flower, the symbolic power of an adopted Korean taking care of and cultivating a Rose of Sharon plant is, of course, enormous. The small plant signifies Jenny's hope of finding her Korean mother and reconnecting to Korea, but also the development of her Koreanisation process accomplished by Brad's gentle upbringing.

Brad takes Myông-su out to share a picnic in one of Los Angeles' public parks, and it is revealed that Brad runs a whole network for adopted Koreans living in the city who have run away from their adoptive parents.<sup>10</sup> The picnic is a social gathering for the adoptees, where

Brad provides Korean food, informs the adoptees about the state of their searches, and encourages them and takes care of them in all possible ways. He also introduces Myông-su as his 'real blood brother' and asks the adoptees to note their physical resemblance, further underscoring the adoption context. Jenny is also present at the picnic, where she takes care of the youngest children. Myông-su does not seem to be aware of the strange and bizarre situation as they all look Korean and have learnt to speak Korean even if at least one of them is clearly of mixed origin, although he notices that no parents are present at all, only children, teenagers and young adults. During the picnic, Jenny realises Myông-su's genuine, innocent and naïve character and slowly starts to respond to his attempts to make contact. One afternoon, Kyông-chôl turns up at the laundry after he has managed to track down Myông-su's whereabouts. During the evening when drinking together, Kyông-chôl tells Brad and Jenny why he came to Los Angeles in the first place. Kyông-chôl, who wants to persuade Myông-su to return, challenges him to a race, and the two Korean marathon runners run together through the empty streets of Los Angeles. However, Kyông-chôl has to leave for the training camp, seemingly without having succeeded in bringing his friend back.

After Kyông-chôl's visit, Jenny develops a new respect for Myông-su as she now knows everything about his background and life story. On American Independence Day, Brad, in his concern about Myông-su feeling at home in Los Angeles, proposes that all three of them should go out partying, and he dresses them in the customers' clothes from the laundry. In the end, they are not able to make it to the party as Brad's car breaks down. Instead, they have their own party, playing music from the radio on the road in the middle of the night. During this celebration all differences between Myông-su and Jenny suddenly disappear when they dance and have fun together. Some days later, when the car breaks down for a second time and it starts to rain, Myông-su and Jenny again find each other by singing Korean pop songs together, and slowly but steadily she opens up her mind to him. Jenny also gives Myông-su back his training outfit, which he had thrown away, urging him to start training again, and henceforth Myông-su starts to run again as by then he has decided that he will participate in the Los Angeles marathon. From there on, Myông-su undergoes a process of Americanisation, driven by a desire for American values of individualism and self-fulfilment, and reflecting a general Korean ambivalence towards America as both an oppressor and a liberator.

One day at the laundry, Brad is finally able to announce to everybody that he has found Jenny's Korean mother. Jenny calls the woman who confirms her motherhood and informs that Jenny's real name is Myông-ja, but also that she (the mother) is married and has three children, and is unable to keep in contact with Jenny. Hence, the good news quickly turns into a disaster, and Jenny is so disappointed in Korea rejecting her for a second time that she crushes the flower pot containing the Rose of Sharon on the floor. Brad is devastated as he understands the symbolic meaning of her act, but Myông-su replants the flower and promises her that if it dies he will get new seeds and soil from Korea. Little by little, Jenny and Myông-su grow closer to one another, and Brad feels jealous and irritated, given the type of over-protecting foster father that he is. Thereafter, Brad leaves for a trip to Korea and arranges for Myông-su to stay at a motel while Jenny remains alone in the house to be on the safe side. During this brief separation, Jenny and Myông-su realise their mutual significance and phone each other repeatedly,

and Jenny becomes Myông-su's training partner, cycling beside him and sharing his efforts and burdens as he trains harder to be able to break the significant limit of 35 kilometres. At this point when Jenny and Myông-su at last become a real couple, Los Angeles' Koreatown is transformed into a place for envisioning a transnational Korean community.<sup>11</sup>

A useful analytical tool when discussing the interactions between a homeland and its diaspora is transnationalism or long-distance nationalism (Hannerz, 1996; Kearney, 1995; Tölölyan, 1996; Vertovec, 1999). In their study of Caribbeans and Philippines in America and their relationships to their respective homelands, anthropologists Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton Blanc (1994) interpret transnationalism as a new form of a deterritorialised community-building aiming at overcoming the tension between a homeland and its diaspora, and being used as a counter-hegemonic resistance strategy for postcolonial societies against globalisation and Westernisation:

Deterritorialized nation-state building is something new and significant, a form of post-colonial nationalism, that reflects and reinforces the division of the entire globe into nation-states. To conceive of a nation-state that stretches beyond its geographic boundaries involves a social fabrication different from diasporic imaginations. To see oneself in a diaspora is to imagine oneself as being outside a territory, part of a population exiled from a homeland ... In counterdistinction is the deterritorialized nation-state, in which the nation's people may live anywhere in the world and still not live outside the state. By this logic, there is no longer a diaspora because wherever its people go, their state goes too. (Basch, Glick Schiller & Szanton Blanc, 1994, p. 269)

A Korean transnationalism would be the vision of a global community of ethnic Koreans encompassing South and North Koreans, and overseas and adopted Koreans, as a way of overcoming the limitations of being a politically divided, culturally diversified and geographically dispersed nation. In this way, it could be said that the Korean nation state is reterritorialising its deterritorialised compatriots. This is also what is suggested by Park Hyun Ok (1996), who characterises Korean diaspora politics, fuelled by globalisation and growing anti-Western sentiments, as a new nationalism of a worldwide community of ethnic Koreans underpinned by colonial experiences and postcolonial developments. For Gabriel Sheffer (2003), in his theory of diasporism, the Korean diaspora is also a concrete example of how an *ethnie* is in the process of being transformed into an incipient diaspora using a communalist strategy to keep together and mobilise itself in the age of transnational networks and ethno-national diasporas. Furthermore, in the light of Thomas Faist's (2000) model of three different stages of transnational social spaces divided between kinship groups (contract workers), circuits (business people) and communities (ethnic diasporas), the Korean version must definitely be said to belong to the last category.

The new transnational character of Korean nationalism is clearly manifested in the question of citizenship and who is to be included in and excluded from the Korean nation. In 1999, a special F-4 visa resembling a dual citizenship was introduced through the Act on the Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans. Due to a successful lobbying campaign by retur-

nees in Korea, the F-4 visa came to include adopted Koreans as well. Despite diplomatic protests from China, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, the two main host countries for ethnic Koreans in Central Asia, the law excluded the Koreans living there as well as the pro-North Korea ethnic Koreans in Japan. Clearly reflecting the country's weak position on the international arena, the first version of the Act only encompassed those who had left the country since the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948. However in 2001, the Korean Constitutional Court ruled the original legislation unconstitutional and the government was forced to extend the limit to 1922 when the Korean family register of *hojuje* was established, meaning that today the great majority of the Korean diaspora is eligible to have the visa. The F-4 visa practically gives all the rights of a Korean citizen to its holder except the right to vote in elections, while at the same time it exempts male holders from otherwise mandatory military service. Through the legislation, which is labelled as being hypernationalistic by Samuel Kim (2000, p. 262), the Korean nation state has instated a new Korean citizenship based on a global *jus sanguinis* (the right of blood), and redemarcated its borders, thus turning all ethnic Koreans worldwide into potential Korean subjects. At the time of writing, there are even discussions to introduce dual citizenship to overseas Koreans, which would also be granted to adoptees.<sup>12</sup>

This ethnopolitical body politics of embracing overseas Koreans has also resulted in the arrival of tens of thousands of Chinese-Koreans as migrant workers or brides filling the shortage of women created by sex-biased abortion, economic contributions from wealthy Korean-Americans at the time of the economic crisis, bettered relationships with Japan mediated through the ethnic Koreans in the country, and the employment of overseas Koreans by transnational Korean companies, while the Korean minority in Central Asia plays an important intermediary role for Korean investment in the region (Choi Inbom, 2003; Kim, J. H., 2004; Moon, 2000; Schlyter, 2002). On the other hand, while the project of building a transnational Korean community may seem successful on the surface, there are also reports of widespread discrimination against Chinese-Koreans in Korea reflecting the hierarchical character of the Korean diaspora in which its affluent segments are much more valued than its poor ones, serious conflicts between Westernised Koreans and Korean nationals working together in Korean companies and embassies abroad, and strongly negative reactions among Koreans in Central Asia against dispatched domestic Koreans using their dominant economic position in efforts to impose their models on their 'overseas brethren'. In this way, Korea's policy towards overseas Koreans also becomes a question of disciplining, policing and homogenising its diaspora according to the logics of social engineering and modernist planning.

Today, the Overseas Koreans Foundation and its civic counterpart, the NGO Korean Sharing Movement (*Uri minjok soro topki undong*), together with researchers, intellectuals and activists, are engaged in trying to formulate how to achieve such a worldwide Korean community, conceptualised as a higher and broader form of national reunification (Cho Seung-bog, 1997; Chung, 2000; Jeong, 2000). All agree that there is an urgent need for reassembling the nation, and maintaining and recovering unity, continuity and homogeneity before it is too late and domestic Koreans become too Westernised and individualistic, while overseas Koreans become too assimilated and integrated into their host cultures. The latter aspect especially

applies to adopted Koreans, and efforts must be made for them to learn the Korean language and culture and reunite with their Korean families to be able to reincorporate them into the Korean nation, according to Soh Kyung-Suk (2001) of Korean Sharing Movement. It is this utopian vision of a global ethnic community of 75 million Koreans that the *minjung* ideologist Paik Nak-chung (1996) scrutinises in such a poignant way. Paik points out that this so-called homogenous community, if it is to be achieved, has to be not only transnational considering the fact that the majority of the overseas Koreans have changed their citizenship, but also multilingual as Korean is no longer the mother tongue for so many of the exiled countrymen. Another sceptic is Kim Woong-ki (2002), who doubts that the Korean Government will ever succeed in achieving its goal given the aggressive implementation of its diaspora policy, and the hierarchical and even rude attitude towards overseas Koreans which creates serious mistrust among them, even if there may be potential on the civic side as the Korean national team's success in the 2002 Soccer World Cup showed by uniting ethnic Koreans from all over the world as independent individuals, including North Koreans who also cheered for the Southern team.<sup>13</sup>

To return to the film narrative, when Brad returns home and discovers that Jenny and Myông-su are a couple, he becomes deeply disappointed. He reveals that he went to Korea only to meet Jenny's mother who was a fine woman, but that 'Koreans just do not understand adoption or adoptees' and so he could not ask her to meet Jenny and was only able to bring back a photo of her (the mother). Brad expels Myông-su, who returns to his team, but still has to cope with the fact that Jenny has become an adult and will soon leave him to start her own life. He continues to cook Korean food to her and shortly later, Brad and Jenny discover that the Rose of Sharon is blossoming, thereby signifying that she has now matured and become an adult, and that Brad's project of re-Koreanising her has been accomplished to the fullest extent. Logically, Brad bids farewell by telling Jenny that she has made him so happy for the whole time they have lived together.

Myông-su and his friend Kyông-chôl participate in the marathon race running side by side with each other. Just before the critical 35 kilometres, Jenny suddenly turns up on her bicycle just as she did during the training. Myông-su supports Kyông-chôl until the end of the race and deliberately allows him to become the gold medal winner. Through this noble and individualistic act on Myông-su's part, his process of Americanisation is completed, and American culture triumphs and becomes fetishised. Another way of interpreting the end of the film is that Myông-su is, of course, simply strengthening and reproducing the Korean way of male bonding. The film ends with Jenny collecting Myông-su after the race, and while driving she remembers how she first came to Brad and his laundry in Koreatown some 10 years previously, at the age of 9 or 10 years. In a flashback, Brad sits alone outside his laundry in the evening after closing time, and Jenny, who is on the run from her adoptive parents, comes up to him and asks whether he is Mr. Oh, who helps adoptees to find their Korean parents. Brad scolds her for having run away from her adoptive home, and closes the door but then comes out again and to ask whether she has had dinner. He tells her that he will teach her to eat Korean food, and allows her into the house. Through this memory, Jenny becomes reconciled with her past and understands that she can now leave her adopted Koreanness behind her as she has finally

become a 'real Korean' and is now able to start her own independent life together with Americanised Myông-su.

In *Love*, except for in the initial scenes, Jenny is no more a problematic and threatening adoptee with different identifications and loyalties than most domestic Koreans. On the contrary, by having learnt to speak Korean and by eating Korean food, she has been turned into a 'real Korean' and been reclaimed and incorporated into the larger space of the worldwide Korean diaspora according to the wishes and dreams of the Korean Government and its diaspora policy. Jenny, who once was a shunned and rejected adoptee and who in the course of the film is re-Koreanised, has therefore gained a new value not just as a reminder of a shameful past but also a living guarantee of a common future for a global Korean community. Thus, Floya Anthias' warning in the introduction, that the concept of diaspora often has a tendency to reinforce and reify ideas and dreams of roots and origins rather than questioning and problematising them, is definitely applicable to the emergence of a transnational Korean diaspora. Furthermore, the film *Love* also overlooks the fact that Jenny once was forcefully and involuntarily uprooted and dispatched overseas by the Korean nation itself and that international adoption still continues, thereby covering up Korean responsibility. The film also refuses to acknowledge any kind of differences, whether between domestic, overseas or adopted Koreans, or between gender, age, class, culture, language and the like, or conflicts and hierarchies within the Korean diaspora where adoptees such as Jenny are placed on the lower ladder, as they usually are despised and frowned upon as social pariahs lacking proper bloodlines by diasporised Koreans who feel a strong urge to distance themselves from a group which symbolises national humiliation and often outnumbers themselves. In the end, the film turns the relationship between Jenny and Myông-su into an allegory for the reconciliation between Korea and its exiled children and a utopian vision of a transnational community embracing all ethnic Koreans around the world.

Despite their various differences, Sky's music video *Eternity* and Lee Jang-soo's feature film *Love* both have in common that wherever they live and whatever their living conditions are, adopted Koreans suffer from having been abandoned and exiled, and are more or less maladjusted and ostracised and alienated from their adoptive families, their host cultures, and Korean and East Asian expatriate and diasporic communities. Above all, adopted Koreans desperately yearn to be reunited with their Korean families and mothers and also to be reconnected with Korea, Korean culture and Korean people. They just wait passively to be helped and be taken care of by the resolute intervention of Korean nationalism, as they are completely victimised and infantilised and lack agency. In the song and film, a clear-cut binary opposition is set up, as Whiteness and the West comes to stand for disease and decadence, while Koreaness and the East is made to stand for solidarity and safety, and, even more importantly, for unity and homogeneity. However, to be rescued and saved by, above all, domestic, diasporic or expatriate Koreans, the adoptees need first to be decontaminated and de-Westernised, disciplined and regulated according to Korean norms and ideals, and re-Koreanised before they are able to rejoin the Korean nation and enjoy the secure protection of Korean male power and be warmly and fully embraced by Mother Korea.

Finally, it cannot be denied that adopted Koreans also are heavily exploited in the two popular cultural works in order to project and articulate internal Korean insecurities, fears and worries, and repressed feelings and social taboos, arousing forbidden desires for Whiteness and creating numerous possibilities for scopophilic pleasures. These representations are also produced by and disseminated and consumed among Korean people beyond the control, without the consent and awareness and, most probably, even without the knowledge of the absolute majority of adopted Koreans, ignoring their actual situations and conditions as well as their complex loyalties and dependencies, and their real desires and dreams, whatever they may be. Given the enormous power of representations, they homogenise the fate of all adopted Koreans into one stereotypical narrative, instead of acknowledging the group's multiple and diverse experiences and subjectivities and the fact that there are numerous different ways of being an overseas Korean adoptee.

## Notes

- 1 However, Koreans had left their country in great numbers already before 1860, as during the Mongol invasions of the 13th century, the Japanese invasions in the 1590s, and the Manchu invasions in the first half of the 17th century, tens of thousands were dragged away as captives or slaves. For instance, it has been estimated that 200,000 were affected in this way as a result of the Mongol invasion, and 50–60,000 as a result of the Japanese intrusion, of whom 3000 or so were repatriated when diplomatic contacts were resumed.
- 2 The official Korean statistics of 5.5–6 million overseas Koreans overestimates the number of Korean-Americans by almost double, as the US 2000 census states the total as just over 1.2 million, including 12 per cent of mixed origin (Yu & Choe, 2003/2004).
- 3 It is, of course, difficult to categorise the growing number of tens of thousands of what are commonly known as *kirōgi* families as victims, meaning those voluntarily split upper middle-class families where the mother and the children go to a Western country for years to learn English and acquire an education that is considered to be better than a Korean one, and where the father stays alone in Korea to finance the family's stay abroad.
- 4 However, there are signs that the Korean Government is more interested in creating a Northeast Asian cultural and economic community than a pan-Korean one, comprising China, Japan and Korea (Chun, 2004). Thus, in reality and ironically, economic incentives are clearly much stronger than ethnic ones.
- 5 Song lyrics translated by the author, and taken from Sky's music album *Final Fantasy. The Best Is Yet To Come*, Doremi Records, 1999.
- 6 *Chosun Ilbo*, November 9, 1999.
- 7 Lee Jang-soo, *Love*, Dong-A Export Corporation, 1999..
- 8 *Chosun Ilbo*, June 29, 1999, September 17, 1999; *Dong-A Ilbo*, September 3, 1999, *Hankyoreh*, June 18, 1999; *Joongang Ilbo*, September 16, 1999; and *Kookmin Ilbo*, September 18, 1999.
- 9 This was the case, despite the fact adopted Koreans had been included in chapters on overseas Koreans in moral education textbooks from as early as 1991 (Helgesen, 1998: 169). See also numerous works in Korean and English by Professor of Anthropology, Lee Kwang-kyu, who is editor of *Koreans in the World*, and former director of the Overseas Koreans Foundation. He is widely regarded to be the leading Korean expert on overseas Koreans, and argues that the adoptive parents of adopted Koreans as well as non-Korean husbands of Korean women should be included in the global Korean community from a traditional Korean standpoint of who constitutes a member of a family.
- 10 It should be noted that on occasions the Korean media has reported accounts of adopted children from Korea who have run away from their adoptive homes and ended up in Los Angeles' Koreatown, and sometimes also in prison, as many of them live as homeless people on the street; see, for example, *Korea Times*, August 21, 1998, stating that approximately 100 hundred adopted children from Korea were on the run in the country at the time of publication, of whom many had gone into hiding in Los Angeles' Koreatown. There are also occasional reports of adoptees having killed their adoptive parents after having been sexually or mentally abused. In other words, the scene in *Love* could well be an intertextual and intermedial reference to such articles.

- 11 Los Angeles may in reality also be the most ideal place for developing a Korean transnational identity and community given the vast number of South Koreans, adopted Koreans, North Korean re-migrants, and ethnic Korean Russian, Central Asian and Latin American 'trimigrants' which are actually living there.
- 12 *Joongang Ilbo*, December 30, 2008.
- 13 In 2004, the Global Association for Koreans Abroad was formed at a meeting in Michigan, United States, including representatives from Japan, Russia, Germany, China, and Brazil, under the slogan 'Seven million overseas Koreans as ONE movement'. The Global Association for Koreans Abroad states that overseas Koreans have historically played a major role in the anti-colonial independence movement and in the democratic movement, and that it will strive to overcome the disruptions of the past and function as a bridge between the two Koreas for the reconciliation and reunification of the Korean nation.

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