

Abstract

Comforting an orphaned nation: Representations of international adoption and adopted Koreans in Korean popular culture

From its beginning at the time of the Korean War, international adoption from Korea has continued for over half a century, resulting in a population of 156,000 adopted Koreans divided between 15 host countries, and still over 2,000 children are leaving Korea annually. Ever since the end of the 1980s, the adoption issue has been a recurring subject in Korean media and popular culture. This is a study of popular cultural representations of adopted Koreans, the scope of which has been restricted to overseas adoptees in Western countries. The study is carried out from a postcolonial perspective and uses a cultural studies reading of popular cultural representation, and four feature films and four popular songs as primary sources. The aim is to examine how nationalism is articulated in various ways in eight popular cultural representations of adopted Koreans in light of the colonial experiences in modern Korean history and recent postcolonial developments within the contemporary Korean society. The principal question addressed is: 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?

After an introductory chapter, Chapter 2 gives the cultural background of adoption in Korean tradition and the history of international adoption from Korea. Chapter 3 is an account of the development of the adoption issue in the political discussion and the appearance of adopted Koreans in Korean popular culture. Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 analyse the cinematic and lyrical representations of adopted Koreans in four feature films and popular songs respectively. Chapter 4 considers the gendering of the colonised nation and the maternalisation of roots in Chang Kil-su's *Susanne Brink's Arirang* (1991) and Sinawe's *Motherland* (1997), drawing on theories of nationalism as a gendered discourse. Chapter 5 examines the issue of hybridity and the relationship between Koreanness and Whiteness in Kim Ki-duk's *Wild Animals* (1997) and Moon Hee Jun's *Alone* (2001), including its album cover, which are related to the notions of third space, mimicry and passing. Linked to studies of national division, reunification and family separation, Chapter 6 looks at the adopted Koreans as symbols of a fractured and fragmented nation in Park Kwang-su's *Berlin Report* (1991) and Clon's *Abandoned Child* (1999). Chapter 7 focuses on the emergence of a global Korean community in Lee Jang-soo's *Love* (1999) and Sky's *Eternity* (1999), including its music video, with regards to theories of globalisation, diasporas and transnationalism. In the concluding chapter, the study argues that the Korean adoption issue can be conceptualised as an attempt at overcoming a difficult past and imagining a common future for all ethnic Koreans at a transnational level.

Keywords: Korean studies, international adoption, adopted Koreans, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, nationalism, diaspora, representation, popular culture, reconciliation

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