

## **Representations of international adoption and overseas adoptees in Korean media and popular culture**

Paper presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Global Overseas Adoptees' Link, Konkuk University, Seoul, August 20, 2005

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### International adoption in the media

With a history stretching back to well over half a century, international adoption has naturally surfaced now and then in the Korean media. However, it was not until the beginning of the 1970s when the struggle for legitimacy waged between the two Koreas entered an even more bitter and intense phase that the adoption issue for the first time came to be treated and discussed as a distinctive and independent media subject in itself.<sup>1</sup> As there are very few signs of any media coverage of overseas adoptees before the 1970s, it is reasonable to assume that international adoption was conceived of as a relatively uncomplicated and uncontroversial emigration practice.

The year of 1970 started with North Korea aggressively accusing its southern neighbor of selling Korean offspring to Westerners for profit, and that the wretched country had nothing more valuable to export but its children.<sup>2</sup> The adoptive parents were portrayed as child abusers, white supremacists and colonial exploiters, and propaganda pictures of South Korean children adopted by “American perverts” were displayed on the streets and shown at exhibitions in North Korea.<sup>3</sup> Media criticism of the country's adoption program continued throughout the 1970s. In 1978, the Tokyo based pro-North Korean journal *Hanyang* published a fiercely nationalistic and highly conspiratorial attack on international adoption, which it conceived as an “indignity against the nation”. These negative and stereotypical Other-representations of white people, in general, and adoptive parents, in particular, have continued to

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<sup>1</sup> A search at *Chosun Ilbo*'s electronic archive (<http://archive.chosun.com/daliy.htm>) (2004-12-17) using the keywords “*ibyang'a*” (“adopted child”) and “*ibyang'in*” (“adoptee”) gives only one hit before 1991 but hundreds afterwards. The only article being found before the 1990s is from August 17, 1961, and consists of an interview with the Korean adoptee Penny Kim and her adoptive family in Rhode Island, the United States.

<sup>2</sup> *Dagens Nyheter*, January 8, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> *Korea Times*, September 3, 2003.

live on in popular cultural productions. Critical voices against the adoption program were again raised in the 1980s, the decade witnessing the highest number of Korean children sent abroad ever. The Korean media reported on trafficking of Korean children for sexual purposes, and on adoption scandals due to hasty procedures and deliveries when non-adoptable children had been sent abroad by mistake, and when infants had died of dehydration during transportation.<sup>4</sup>

The 1988 Seoul Olympic Games marked the symbolic breakthrough for a newly democratized and industrialized Korea ready for globalization, and had an enormous impact on making the country known in the world. Journalists from all over the world started to write about Korea, which, for many years, had been just another one of the many poor countries and military dictatorships in the “Third World”. However, Western media also scrutinized Korea’s adoption program, which was highlighted as a trade in human beings.<sup>5</sup> The American magazine *The Progressive* opened up the debate by publishing Matthew Rothschild’s investigative feature story “Babies for sale” in its January edition. The article portrayed Korea as a country dealing in the full-scale business of selling its own children. The text was immediately serialized in North Korean *The People’s Korea* as well as being translated and published in the leftist South Korean journal *Mal*, while its thought-provoking cover, depicting a Korean child bathing in dollar bills, ever since has functioned as the classical visual media reference when bringing up the Korean adoption issue, appearing over and over again in television documentaries and in popular cultural productions.<sup>6</sup>

The following two years, Korean newspapers exploded with angry editorials and excited columns demanding a drastic decrease in or an immediate stop to international adoption, to address the negative image of the country conveyed by the Western media as the world’s leading supplier of adoptive children.<sup>7</sup> For the first

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<sup>4</sup> For adoption scandals and rumors about trafficking of Korean children for sexual exploitation, see *Korea Herald*, August 9, 1980, and *Joongang Ilbo*, August 6, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> *New York Times*, April 21, 1988; *International Herald Tribune*, April 22, 1988, and *Washington Post*, December 12, 1988.

<sup>6</sup> *Mal*, 3/1988, and *The People’s Korea*, February 20, March 5, and March 12, 1988.

<sup>7</sup> *Chosun Ilbo*, April 24, 1988, June 8, 1988, 13 November, 1988, February 12, 1989; *Dong-A Ilbo*, May 3, 1988, May 12, 1988; *Hankook Ilbo*, July 3, 1988, October 19, 1988, February 2, 1989, February 19, 1989; *Hankyoreh*, October 2, 1988, October 11, 1988, February 9,

time, previously classified statistics revealing the whole scale of the gigantic dispersal of Korean children were published, and policy-makers and government officials such as the Minister of Health and Social Affairs, who, for a long time, had refused to grant interviews on the sensitive subject, felt themselves forced to speak out in public. Adoption agencies, government officials, policy makers and birth parents all received their share of harsh criticism for exporting Korean children. The heated discussion not only involved the media, but also women's organizations, civil rights groups and religious denominations. This vociferous public anti-adoption stance most certainly influenced and probably forced the government's decision to stipulate the year 1996 as the deadline for international adoption.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Korean editorials optimistically foresaw the final years of the country's adoption program as the number of international placements had been on the decrease for several years in a row. Nevertheless in 1994, to the dismay and disappointment of those who had struggled so hard to regain the honor of the nation, the government decided to postpone the plan to eliminate international adoption in favor of the more distant year of 2015.<sup>8</sup> This approach to the adoption issue, giving absolute priority to the image of the nation over the welfare of single mothers and their children, has continued to be heard the most of in the mainstream media and among government representatives.

#### Overseas adoptees in the media

The first generation of adult adopted Koreans began visiting Korea already from the second half of the 1970s, either as individuals or as participators in tours organized by adoption agencies like Holt (from 1975) or the Adoption Center (*Adoptionscentrum*) of Sweden (from 1983) as part of their so-called post-adoption or post-placement services.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the first sporadic articles on adopted Koreans

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1989, February 16, 1989, June 25, 1989; *Joongang Ilbo*, June 6, 1988; *Korea Herald*, February 25, 1989, September 9, 1989; *Korea Times*, October 13, 1989, and *Sigun Sosik*, 5/1989.

<sup>8</sup> *Korea Herald*, June 14, 1994.

<sup>9</sup> *Chosun Ilbo*, March 16, 1974, and *Korea Newsreview*, July 9, 1977, January 26, 1980, November 21, 1981, and September 25, 1982.

visiting Korea were published in Korean newspapers.<sup>10</sup> These earliest portrayals firmly laid the foundation for the present day's heavy focus on searching for roots (*ppuri ch'akki*) and visiting the motherland (*moguk pangmun*).<sup>11</sup>

At the end of the 1980s, ads placed by adopted Koreans searching for their Korean parents and relatives and, above all, their birth mothers (*saengmo*), started to appear on an intermittent basis in the Korean media. Henceforth, thousands of ads have been published regularly in Korean newspapers.<sup>12</sup> The widely seen KBS television show *Morning Forum (Ach'im Madang)*, which every week since 1991 airs a search for a missing person, often raises the question of international adoption and the reunions are taken place live in the studio.<sup>13</sup> In 2004, KBS also started to air the television show *Happy Sunday*, where the reunions between overseas adoptees and birth parents instead are taking place in the Western host countries.

In 1990, Seoul YWCA set up its annual visiting program for adopted Koreans, which has become the blueprint for numerous others organized by authorities, associations and universities. The setting up of these visiting programs for overseas adoptees naturally resulted in more and more adoptees visiting the country and appearing in the media. At the beginning of the 1990s, adoptees also became increasingly visible in the Korean media in connection with the reporting of the emergence of an organized adopted Korean movement. Frequent coverage of those who, in one way or another, had made themselves a name, was prevalent from the beginning, reflecting an almost exclusive interest in "model citizen" adoptees.

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<sup>10</sup> Rare but occasional interviews with adoptees living in Western countries had been made now and then even before the 1970s. See, for example, the portrayal of a mixed race child in America named Clemens in *Chosun Ilbo*, March 4, 1959, an interview with a mixed race Korean adoptee who returns to Korea as a soldier in the US Army in *Chosun Ilbo*, August 20, 1964, and a feature article on the mixed adoptee Debbie and her adoptive family in the US in *Chosun Ilbo*, December 25, 1966. However before the 1970s, overseas adopted Koreans of mixed origin were never really perceived as being ethnic Koreans in patrilinear and racist Korea but rather as children having returned to their "natural home" and "fatherland".

<sup>11</sup> *Korea Newsreview*, June 26, 1982, August 28, 1982, and January 8, 1983.

<sup>12</sup> In 2000, 76 ads appeared in *Kookmin Ilbo* alone. Already from the 1960s, some mixed race Korean adoptees had been searching for their biological parents through the media, but those early ads had symptomatically only concerned the other way around, namely their biological fathers in America.

<sup>13</sup> In 2004, eight searches made by the program on behalf of overseas adoptees ended successfully with reunions taking place live in the studio. See *Joongang Ilbo*, April 7, 2005.

At the end of 1995 Brian Bauman, an adopted Korean attending the US Air Force Academy and diagnosed with leukemia, requested the Korean media to help him find a compatible bone-marrow donor to save his life.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the first half of 1996 was wholly dominated by the dramatic hunt for Bauman's relatives, a search that took place through newspaper articles, radio transmissions and television programs on an almost daily basis. The search ended successfully when thousands of relatives of children given up for adoption had contacted newspapers and television channels or registered with blood banks. Because of Bauman's military connection, the ROK army required all its enlistees to register, and a donor was eventually found.

After Bauman's story, a more mature approach to the adoption issue has slowly but steadily gained ground, linking the causes of international adoption to gender issues and the plight of handicapped, biracial and extramarital children in Korean society. This new approach is discernable in articles written by prolific debaters and writers who openly discuss incentives to increase domestic adoption, the tabooization of teenage pregnancies, the lack of sufficient sex education in schools, and the growing number of admissions to institutions after family break-ups. A good representative of this self-critical or even masochistic attitude is the journalist Cho Sông-gwan who bluntly states that the adopted Koreans are nothing else but victims and products of the country's Confucian face saving culture and patriarchal family system, and that Korea will never be acknowledged as a modern nation in the Western world as long as it continues to send its children abroad for international adoption.<sup>15</sup>

The adoption issue was particularly accentuated during Kim Dae Jung's presidency who in 1998 delivered an official apology for having sent away over 150,000 Korean children for international adoption. At the same time, his wife the First Lady Lee Hee-ho, officially stated that saw herself as a supporter and patron of all adopted

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<sup>14</sup> Several documentaries were aired like the KBS Sunday Special *Who Will Save Brian Bauman?*, and Bauman's life and his dramatic rescue was turned into an autobiography, *Brian Sungduk Bauman's Life Story* (1997).

<sup>15</sup> See Cho Sông-gwan. 1998. *A! Taehanmin'guk* [Alas! Republic of Korea]. Seoul: Chajaknamu.

Koreans overseas.<sup>16</sup> The mediated story of Adam King is an illustrative and representative example of the presidential couple's commitment to the adoption issue. On 5 April 2001, in the presence of the presidential couple and on prime time television, a 9-year-old severely handicapped adopted Korean boy from the US named Adam King solemnly opened the Korean professional baseball league by pitching the first ball at Chamsil stadium in Seoul.<sup>17</sup> As former guest pitchers had been presidents, celebrities and beauty pageant winners, this spectacular event received massive national media coverage.

The mainstream media's critical adoption stance was again particularly strong at the time of the country's co-hosting of the 2002 Football World Cup together with Japan. Continuous international adoption was seen by many as perpetuating an image of Korea as a backward and primitive country, thereby destroying the goodwill that had been gained through the successful event and threatening to cripple tourism and foreign investment.<sup>18</sup> During the World Cup, even the immortalized coach of the 2002 Korean national football team, the Dutchman Guus Hiddink, told the perplexed Korean media that he harbored an interest in the adoption issue as he had met several adopted Koreans in his home country, the Netherlands. Lastly in August 2004, the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Gathering of Adult Korean Adoptees took place in Seoul with over 400 participants from 15 different countries, and this time the Korean media focused mainly on the burgeoning and lively adopted Korean movement and community.<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, again editorials appeared in Korean newspapers expressing shame for still sending children abroad to Western countries in spite of being the world's 10<sup>th</sup> biggest economy:<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Kookmin Ilbo*, March 24, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Just like Brian Bauman, Adam King was also the subject of several television documentaries and newspaper feature stories turning him into something close to a national mascot, and an autobiography, *Adam King's Family Story* (2001), was released as well as a children's book about his life.

<sup>18</sup> According to a review of a report written by a high ranking Korean diplomat in *Korea Times*, March 22, 2004, the international image of Korea is still today dominated by the Korean War, the partition and international adoption.

<sup>19</sup> *Dong-A Ilbo*, August 6, 2004; *Chosun Ilbo*, August 5, 2004; *Joongang Ilbo*, August 6, 2004, and *Korea Herald*, August 6, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> *Joongang Ilbo*, August 5, 2004, and *Korea Herald*, August 9, 2004.

So ever since the beginning of the 1970s, when the subject was raised for the first time, in the media discussion, the adoption issue has continued to be linked to and centered on nationalist discomfort and humiliation, even if the social aspects started to be highlighted in a more serious manner during the presidential term of Kim Dae Jung. The negative image and reputation of Korea in Western countries caused by the continuation of international adoption and the existence of adopted Koreans, has always been more important and prioritized than the dismantling of the adoption industry, the uprooting of prejudices against extramarital, mixed race and handicapped children, and the building of a comprehensive welfare system for single mothers and their children. Media representations of adopted Koreans have strongly focused on individual success stories while at the other end, the majority of popular cultural representations instead look at the negative sides of international adoption.

#### International adoption in Korean popular culture

The Korean adoption issue has left several marks upon contemporary Korean popular culture figuring in a wide range of genres. On Korean television, the adoption issue sometimes surfaces at the most unexpected occasions. In a 1990s entertainment program, where a television team travels around Korea and meets with local people who are encouraged to perform a song, a middle-aged woman once proudly stated in front of the camera that she dedicated her song to her adopted daughter in Sweden. Additionally, in a December 1998 episode of the playful MBC role-playing program *Non-Invited Guest* (*Ch'odaepatchi anûn sonnim*) the young participants were asked to act out a scene, where an adopted Korean girl returns to her hometown and meets her Korean mother.

However, it is, of course, in the ubiquitous genre of Korean television drama and soap operas, where the adoption issue and adoptees as plot devices and fictional characters mostly figures. Excluding the numerous Korean drama series where domestic adoption and fostering occur in one way or another, in 1996, SBS aired the drama series *When the Salmon Returns* (*Yônôga toraol ttae*), where the star actress Hwang Su Jung plays Cheri Straw, an American adoptee who comes to Korea and becomes acquainted with Kang-chaе, a Korean journalist who covers the adoption issue. The two end up as a couple and want to marry each other, but Kang-chaе's

mother objects and demands to know more about the past of Cheri's Korean family. In 1996, in connection with a growing interest in ethnic Koreans overseas, *I.5*, a television drama set among Koreans in the US was aired on MBC.<sup>21</sup> The title refers to the Korean-American generation arriving in America above the age of six, and thus falling in-between the first and second generation of immigrants. One of the characters of *I.5* is the male adopted Korean Chin-ho, played by the very popular actor Shin Hyun-Jun whose adoptive parents have divorced and who meets a Korean international student and starts a relationship with her.

In 1998, international adoption also played a part in the MBC drama *Say Woman* (*Yôjarûl malhandâ*) as a young woman has to relinquish her son who is sent to the US, but comes back as the English teacher Michael and happens to get his Korean mother as one of his pupils. A French adopted Korean with a difficult past appeared in MBC's 16 episode-long *Love* (*Sarang*) (1998), and SBS's *Mister Q* (1997), a television drama set among Koreans in the USA, again contained an adopted Korean. In MBC's *Hotelier* (2001), the hotel attorney Dong-hyuk receives a message from his father that he has an unknown sister named Jenny in America. The 2002 one hour-long KBS Drama City film *Gangster Father* (*Kkangp'ae appa*) tells the story of a gangster who once sent his son away for international adoption, and now starts to search for him. In 2004, MBC produced the 16 episode-long mini series *Ireland* where actress Lee Na Young stars as the adopted Korean woman Jung-ah who grows up in an Irish-American adoptive family. However, when the family moves back to Ireland and her adoptive brother becomes involved in the IRA and the Irish republican movement, her adoptive parents get killed. Deeply traumatized, Jung-ah then goes to Korea where she ends up unknowingly falling in love with her biological brother.

The most popular Korean drama series at the end of 2004 with a viewer audience of 30 percent, KBS's *Sorry I Love You* (*Mianhada saranghanda*) featured Mu-hyeok, a young man who grew up as an overseas adoptee in an abusive adoptive family in Australia. The self-destructive Mu-hyeok returns to Korea to exact revenge on his Korean mother for abandoning him, and he becomes involved in the Korean

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<sup>21</sup> *Chosun Ilbo*, January 29, 1996.

underworld working as a pimp. In the end, it turns out that he has a biological twin brother and that his mother is a famous actress. SBS's 2004 melodramatic series *Stained Glass (Yurihwa)* has an unusual Korean adoptee in Japan, Dong-ju, as its main character. Played by Lee Dong-gun, Dong-ju has been adopted by the president of a Japanese insurance company, and after having become the heir to the corporation he returns to Korea to look for his best friend from the orphanage. Lastly, the spring of 2005, saw a number of Korean feminist inspired television dramas having "dysfunctional" but nonetheless strong and independent women, teenage and single mothers, and spinsters and divorcees, as main characters, and one of them, MBC's *My Name is Kim Sam-soon (Nae irûmûn Kim Sam-soon)* which reached a record viewer rating of 37.7 percent at the end of June, contains a biracial Korean-American man whose mother is an adopted Korean in the lead cast.<sup>22</sup> This character named Henry Kim, is played by actor Daniel Henney, who through the series overnight became a top model in Korean commercials and advertisements, and who himself also in reality is the son of an American adopted Korean woman.

The adoption issue also turns up now and then in Korean plays and musicals. Brian Bauman's story inspired play writer Kim Chong-suk to stage the opera musical *Barry – A Forgotten Lullaby (Pari – ithyôjin chajang'ga)* at Seoul Arts Center in 1998, attracting much media mention. The musical tells the story of a female American adoptee played by the actress Lee Sun-hee who travels to Korea and starts to search for her Korean mother.<sup>23</sup> In 2000, Kim Chong-suk returned to the adoption issue in her *Raining Como Pass*, staged at the Opera House of Seoul Arts Center. The genre of the musical drama is used to tell the story of Sun-ae, a Korean woman at the time of the Korean War who is forced to give up her only child for adoption. A highly spectacular adoption play making use of the classical antique drama of Oedipus is the rock musical *Sphinx* (2002), written by Hong Won-ki, in which the leading character Tommy, an adopted Korean from the USA, visits Korea and accidentally and unknowingly kills his birth Korean father and falls in love with his Korean birth mother.

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<sup>22</sup> *Chosun Ilbo*, June 30, 2005, and *Dong-A Ilbo*, June 16, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> *Chosun Ilbo*, November 12, December 25, 1998; *Hankyoreh*, December 31, 1998, and *Joongang Ilbo*, December 14, 1998.

The adoption issue sometimes also appears in Korean cartoons and comics. Adopted Koreans are visible in several episodes in the celebrated cartoonist Park Kwangsoo's two volumes *kwangsoo's thoughts* (1998), and the author openly pleads for the replacement of international adoption with domestic adoption. The same is true for the *Hankyoreh* cartoonist Park Si-Baek who in a number of strips has looked at the adoption issue from a critical perspective, while an adopted Korean from New York named John plays a prominent role as a priest and sorcerer in Youn In-wan's and Yang Kyung-il's seven-volume long comic epos *Island* (1998-2001) by coming back to Korea and meeting his birth parents. Jake, another American adopted Korean, is the main character in Pak Kyông-jin's two volume-long comic book *The Sea above the Sky (Hanûl wiûi pada)* (1999). Jake is a high school student who longs for his family in Korea and has difficulties to cope with his adoptive parents. One day Hyê-sin, a female international student from Korea, comes to his American hometown, and the story follows the unusual couple through their ups and downs.

#### Overseas adoptees in Korean pop songs and feature films

Korean popular music (*kayo*) has been characterized by a high degree of indigenization and hybridization of Western genres, encompassing rap and hip-hop, house and techno, jazz, blues and reggae, and even a Koreanized version of punk. In 1997 Sinawe, Korea's most famous rock band of their time, released its sixth album containing the song *Motherland*. *Motherland* vividly depicts an adopted Korean and his or her inner feelings of abandonment and loneliness, rootlessness and alienation. However, what is most important with *Motherland* is the blurred merging of the biological mother with Korea as the nation becomes figured as a mother. The message of the song is simply that it is only by reuniting with the biological mother and returning to the Motherland that an adopted Korean can be relieved from being and feeling eternally different and lonely. In 1998, the jazz musician Chung Won Young named his third album and a song after a fictitious *Young Mi Robinson* (1998), an adopted Korean woman in the US. The album cover is a reproduction of a painting by Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine, an adoptee from Belgium.

In June 1999, the legendary dance group Clon invited all adopted Koreans who for the moment were visiting Korea to a free concert called *Be Strong* in Seoul.

At this extraordinary event, the group performed songs from its third newly released album including *Abandoned Child* which is explicitly dedicated to all adopted Koreans overseas. The lyrics of *Abandoned Child* are slowly rapped to the tones of a romantic piano theme creating an air of melancholy. The album cover tells that the inspiration to write *Abandoned Child* came after having watched a television documentary on adopted Koreans who comes back to Korea and searches for their Korean mother: “This song’s earnest message is conveyed deeply into the heart”. The song portrays an adopted Korean who longs for the biological mother in Korea. With its simple and sincere message, *Abandoned Child* is the most typical of Korean adoption songs in representing the fate of Korea’s lost children.

Sky’s *Eternity* from the rock group’s 1999 debut album *Final Fantasy* is the most famous Korean popular song dealing with the adoption issue. Elected as Korea’s best music video of the year, it makes use of the form of an action film to tell the dramatic story of how two biological brothers are adopted into two different adoptive families in Canada, and how their lives are fatally intertwined 20 years later. As young adults, one brother has become a depressed criminal and the other an aspiring police agent. The criminal brother gets to know an ethnic Korean immigrant woman who takes care of him and helps him to start searching for his missing brother. However in a fatal shooting, the police brother unknowingly kills his own sibling, and the music video ends at the same airport the siblings arrived into as adoptive children with the surviving brother about to leave for Korea.

In October 2001 Moon Hee Jun, former singer of the extremely popular group H.O.T. and one of the most outstanding personalities of “K-pop”, released his first solo album which just in a few days reached the number one position on Korea’s top selling list. The title song *Alone* depicts an adopted Korean in a Western country feeling miserable and helpless. Moon Hee Jun openly stated in an interview that *Alone* is a song focusing on an overseas adoptee’s “sorrow and misfortune”.<sup>24</sup> The singer continued by saying that “overseas adoptees live miserable lives”, that he wanted to express the growing wish to search for roots among adoptees, and that he received inspiration to write the lyrics while studying the contents of adopted Ko-

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<sup>24</sup> *Donga Ilbo*, October 25, 2001.

rean homepages on the Internet. The album cover shows a photo of the singer hugging a sleeping strikingly blond-haired white boy in his arms. This photo is a provocative statement on the adoption issue as Moon Hee Jun has reversed the actual power structure between the West and the non-West and acts like a Korean adoptive father to a white adopted child. Moon Hee Jun's absolutely inappropriate act of mimicking by pretending to be an Asian adoptive parent to a Western adopted child therefore serves to highlight and criticize the hegemonic narrative of international adoption and its taken-for-grantedness as a white privilege.

In 2004, the talented female singer Sol Flower debuted with *10 Million Ways to Live*, which had on it the reggae-inspired hit song *Kiss the Kids*. The music video shows a female adopted Korean from Canada named Suzy who visits Korea to meet her Korean mother, and experiences herself as a Korean child 20 years earlier, and authentic photographs of adopted Koreans are inserted between the scenes as well as being printed on an inside folder of the album cover. The same year, male singer and songwriter Lee Kwang Pil released an album called *White Night*, with the title song depicting "the feelings of a 15 year old adoptee in Northern Europe" according to an interview.<sup>25</sup> Besides, on the album Lee Kwang Pil also sings the unofficial Korean national anthem *Arirang* together with three adopted Koreans from Europe.

Just like with Korean television dramas, numerous Korean feature films look at adoption-related issues, clearly reflecting not just a Korean obsession with blood ties and biological roots, but also the actual presence of countless of orphans and abandoned children within the country. If limiting the subject of adoption in Korean cinema solely to international adoption, already in the 1960s and 1970s overseas adoptees began appearing in Korean feature films, most of whom had been adopted in China or Japan, but some also in Western countries.<sup>26</sup> An extraordinarily example of the first instance is Kang Dae-jin's film *A Miracle of Gratitude* (*Poûnûi kijôk*) from 1967, where Hanako, a Japanese woman who has been living in colonial Manchuria, becomes separated from her daughter Humiko while fleeing to Japan at the

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<sup>25</sup> *Chosun Ilbo*, August 2, 2004.

<sup>26</sup> An extremely rare example of the other way around is Jang Il-ho's *Bridge of Hyônhaet'an* (1963), where a Japanese girl is abandoned when the Japanese leave Korea and is adopted by a Korean couple. As an adult, she tracks down her biological parents in Japan but decides to stay with her adoptive family in Korea.

end of World War II, and instead herself takes care of an orphaned Korean boy, whom she names Hideo. Twenty years later, Hanako tracks down the biological parents of Hideo in Seoul, and finds out that they had taken in and adopted her own lost daughter Humiko. In the end, Hideo and Humiko marry each other, signifying some kind of a reconciliation between Japan and Korea. Another example is Kwon Young Sun's *Between Love* (*Chôngwa chông saiê*) (1972), where a Korean girl, Michie, is adopted by the Brown family from America at the time of the Korean War, and is then re-adopted by the Ichigawa family from Japan. In Japan, she suffers from racism and discrimination against Koreans, and when Michie's birth mother finds her, she decides to return to Korea. She also decides that she will spend her summer vacation at the Brown's in the United States and her winter vacation at the Ichigawa's in Japan to keep in contact with both her adoptive families.

The earliest of works depicting an adopted Korean from a Western country must be director Cheong Jin Woo's *When April Goes by* (*Sawôli kamyôn*) from 1967 where Mun, a Korean woman adopted by a French family at the time of the Korean War, visits Korea for the first time in 18 years and gets to know Seong-hun, a man working for the French Embassy in Seoul. The two fall in love with each other, but Mun has to return to her adoptive family in France. In Lee Du Yong's *A Guilty Woman* (*Choemanûn yôin*) (1971), the Korean male adoptee, Young-Hun, returns from America after his adoptive father has passed away in order to marry Kang-Ae, his childhood sweetheart who now is married to another man. *A Guilty Woman* ends with Young-Hun understanding the futility of his attempts to win Kang-Ae back. Byeon Chang-ho's action film *Black Butterfly* (*Hûgnabi*) from 1974 has as its lead character Jang, a female Korean War orphan who has grown up as the adopted daughter of an American big business owner and is married to an American man. Jang returns for a visit to Korea to search for friends she grew up together with at the orphanage. However, all of her former friends are mysteriously killed, and when she eventually understands that the murders are carried out by the order of her American husband, she commits suicide as she wants to end her life in the country she was born in. Film director Lee Du Yong returned to international adoption in *44<sup>th</sup> Street, New York* (1976) where a Korean man known as Dong-wuk comes to New York and meets Henry, a rich antiquities dealer who has an adopted Korean daughter named

Jane. Dong-wuk tries to get hold of Henry's fortune but is instead killed by an American woman he abandoned and betrayed for Jane. Two other early adoption films are Choi Hyeon-min's *Anna's Will* (*Annaûi yusô*) (1975), where a young woman working as a prostitute outside an American military base gives her daughter Eun-mi up for adoption to an American couple, who, as an adult, later comes back to Korea to visit her birth mother's grave, and Lee Won-se's *Festival of Migrants* (*Ch'ôlsaedûlûi ch'ukche*) (1978), in which Seung-hee, a Korean woman who has grown up at an orphanage, gives her mixed race son up for international adoption to America.

In Lee Kyu Hyeong's *Grown-Ups Just Don't Understand* (*Ôrûndûrûn mol'layo*) (1988), a parentless boy named Min-yong is taken care of by Jun, a boxer. Min-yong causes a lot of trouble for his benefactor Jun, and the film ends with him leaving Korea to be adopted to a Western country. In Nam Ki-nam's *Taekwondo Boy Ernie and Master Kim* (1989), a Korean adoptee known as Michael learns taekwondo from a Korean master on a visit in the USA. In February 1990, there were big headlines in both the Korean and Western media that director Kim So-yong had plans to make a feature film called *American Dream*, in which an American couple adopt a Korean child with the sole and cynical purpose of it serving as an organ donor for their biological child who needs a new heart.<sup>27</sup> In the end, this spectacular and controversial film project came to nothing as a result of massive and angry protests from the US Embassy and adoption agencies. In 1990, Park Chul-soo's *Oseam Hermitage* came out, a film where international adoption figures. Based on a popular story written by Jeong Chae-bong, the orphaned siblings Kil-son and Kam-i run away from a Catholic orphanage after having been informed that the boy Kil-son is to be sent away for international adoption in the Netherlands. The siblings desperately try to find their home and mother, and eventually end up at a Buddhist hermitage after an odyssey through a rapidly changing 1970's Korea filled with hardships. Park Ho Tae's melodrama *Red Wild Berries 5* (*Ppalgan aengdu 5*) from 1990 shows an adopted woman from the US, Soo-ra, coming back to Korea to

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<sup>27</sup> *Boston Globe*, February 25, 1990; *Joongang Ilbo*, February 12, 1990; *Kookmin Ilbo*, February 9, 1990, and *Korea Times*, February 15, 1990.

exact revenge on the murderer of her birth mother. She also manages to drive the murderer to suicide, but ends up in jail herself.

*Susanne Brink's Arirang*, released in 1991 and directed by respected Chang Kil-su, is arguably the most famous of all Korean feature films representing an overseas adoptee in a wholly Western setting. Regarding his intentions with the film, director Kang said in an interview: "I will reveal the problems of adoption abroad and who should assume responsibility through a girl's growth process, who has been placed in Sweden".<sup>28</sup> The script is based on a true story and depicts the life of an adopted Korean woman of Sweden. The film follows her hardships with an abusive adoptive family, two suicide attempts and endless misery. In the film, 18 years old Susanne ends up as a single mother to a mixed daughter. One day, a Korean television team led by a male journalist and making a documentary on adopted Koreans in Europe visits Susanne in Sweden. Through the documentary her Korean mother is found, Susanne travels to Korea for the first time in 20 years, and the film ends with mother and daughter embracing each other in front of the journalist.

In 1991 celebrated leftist director Park Kwang-su's *Berlin Report* was also released, a feature film set in Paris with the adoption issue as its main theme. The narrative of *Berlin Report* circles around Sông-min, a 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 20s. Marie-Hélène is mentally disturbed and unable to speak, but little by little the correspondent is able to roll up 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, and he in the end left Paris for Berlin. 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

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<sup>28</sup> *Seoul Shinmun*, January 13, 1991.

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 Jang Young-il’s drama *The Exit of Love Hotel* (*Lôbûhot’êl pisang’gu*) (1993), the street thug Ko-min rapes Mi-yeon and gets thrown into prison for the crime. After his release, he starts a business with call girls and finds out that one of them is the woman he once raped who now has a daughter she is trying to get adopted overseas. Ko-min realizes that it is his own daughter, and by confessing he is able to reconcile with Mi-yeon and cancel the adoption. In 1995, Bae Yong-kyun made use of an American adopted Korean in his experimental film *The People in White* (*Kômûna ttangê hûina paeksông*), which was screened at the Venice Film Festival and was well-received by both Korean and Western film critics.<sup>29</sup> A Korean War orphan in his 40s mysteriously known as H returns to Korea and arrives in a dreamlike hotel where the past and the present coexist. Wandering through this mystical world, H meets with various spiritual characters representing the trials and tribulations of Korea’s tortured past, and his pilgrimage serves as a metaphor for the Korean people’s collective mourning and desperate search for an identity and a future. From the end of the 1990s, international adoption began featuring as a minor part in the plots of several feature films. One example is *Push! Push!* (*Sanbuingwa*) from 1997, a comedy depicting the daily routines at a maternity ward in Seoul made by the director of *Oseam Hermitage*, Park Chul-soo. The film contains a scene, where a high school student delivers a child. The ward sister calls an adoption agency and makes an agreement to give the child up for international adoption. The student refuses to see her own child after birth, but when parting she starts to scream that she wishes her child to be adopted domestically, not to be sent abroad to a distant and foreign country. Another 1997 comedy with a feminist slant is director Kim Bon’s *Baby Sale*, which also provided a direct reference to the adoption issue with movie star Choi Jin Sil playing a middle-class career woman who does not want to stay at home with her newborn son. Therefore, she hires a false “baby thief” saying he belongs to Holt who threatens to kidnap and sell the child overseas if the father does not instead take paternity leave.

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<sup>29</sup> *Hankyoreh*, December 5, 1997; *Joongang Ilbo*, April 7, 1995, November 21, 1997, and *Kookmin Ilbo*, April 1, 1995.

Kim Ki-duk, Korean cinema's *enfant terrible* and notorious for his brutal depictions of the dark underside of modern Korean society, has taken up the adoption issue in his second feature film *Wild Animals* from 1997. The film 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 meets 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. Logically, in the final spectacular scene of *Wild Animals* Laura kills her South and North Korean compatriots, and the film ends with the adopted Korean left alone trapped in an inescapable third space in-between Koreanness and Whiteness. The relationship between Korea and its diaspora is dealt with in Lee Jang-soo's feature film *Love* from 1999, a romantic melodrama set in Los Angeles' Koreatown where South Koreans, Korean-Americans and adopted Koreans 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 adoptive parents and has grown up as a foster child of Brad. Brad is a mysterious figure who has a network for other adopted Koreans on the run from white American society, and helps them to find their biological parents and reconnect to Korea. At the end, Myông-su and Jenny become a couple and their relationship is turned into 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.

Yet another quite recent feature film where international adoption frames the narrative is Park Jae-ho's erotic drama *Summer Time* (2001). *Summer Time* starts with a returning male American adoptee searching for his Korean mother, and after meeting a woman who knows about his family background the story unfolds. Set at the time of the Kwangju incident in 1980, Sang-ho is a leftwing student activist on the run who ends up in a down-trodden working-class neighborhood of an anonymous city. By accident, Sang-ho peeps at the married couple living underneath his

rented room, and embarks upon a secret relationship with the woman played by Kim Ji-hyeon. The husband discovers his wife's secret affair and kills Sang-ho, but the woman is already pregnant and delivers a son who ends up being put up for international adoption after the suicide of the mother. Another feature being framed by international adoption is Kim Seong-su's comedy *Please Teach Me English* (*Yông'ô wanjôn chôngbok*) (2003). The film's main character is the shoe salesman Mun-su, a Korean wannabe playboy, who is studying English and attending a private institute as his biological sister, who is adopted into an American family, is about to come to Korea. Yet another film containing references to the adoption issue is Park Chan-wook's dark psychological thriller *Old Boy* (2003), where the lead character Mr. Oh is a victim of a cruel conspiracy. He wakes up after 15 years locked in a room to find out that his daughter has been adopted to Sweden.<sup>30</sup>

Summing up, all these popular cultural representations of international adoption and overseas adoptees, challenging, contradicting and even defying the mainstream media's success stories, reflect a contending image of international adoption going back to the dissident tradition of the 1970s and 80s. So if, as expressed in the editorials and column inches written by mainstream media, international adoption is a debatable and deplorable but nonetheless necessary evil and most adopted Koreans are believed to have succeeded in creating successful lives for themselves, then international adoption is, according to the popular cultural representations, an expression of Western exploitation and oppression and the adopted Koreans are all living miserable and tragic lives, while the adoptive parents are abusing their children from Korea in all possible ways and the white populations in the recipient countries are torturing them with racism and discrimination, even including their significant others.

Finally, it cannot be denied that adopted Koreans are heavily exploited in the media and popular cultural works. All these mediated and popular cultural images and representations are written and produced by and consumed among Korean peo-

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<sup>30</sup> According to *Joongang Ilbo*, Park Chan-wook originally planned to use a Swiss adopted Korean in his widely seen action film *Joint Security Area* (*Kongdong kyôngbi kuyôk*) (2000), instead of a second-generation mixed race immigrant Korean, which eventually was the case.

ple beyond the control, without the consent 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. They homogenize 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.