Special Feature

The Return of the Returnee: A Historicized Reading of Adult Overseas Adoptees "Going Back" in South Korean Cinema*

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Introduction: South Korean ICA and the Study of its Cinematic Representation

In important ways the history of inter-country adoption (hereafter, ICA) of children from Korea begins with the arrival of the US Armed Forces on the southern part of the Korean Peninsula in 1945, which led to the birth of the first generation of Amerasian or mixed Korean American children.[1] Since the mid-1950s approximately 165,000 children have been adopted to Western countries, which makes South Korea the country with the highest per capita adoption rate. On the backdrop of intense ethnonationalism and extreme poverty, ICA was systematized by ways of the Korean War: initially in the form of Christian aid programs rescuing "orphaned" Korean War children; many of whom were fathered by US army personnel and classified as Amerasian or mixed race (*honhyeol*), lit. mixed blood. South Korean ICA has surely developed in a zigzagging trajectory and served various biopolitical population control agendas of the shifting Cold War military regimes (Hübinette 2006, 38-66; Kim 2010).[2] From the late 1960s the number of ICAs of children classified as mixed was overtaken by full or majority Korean ones and in conjunction with the establishment of the Western welfare societies and reproductive rights paradigm around 1970, the number of ICAs escalated and experienced a virtual boom in the 1980s during the Chun

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1. Note on the use of *ethnicity* and *race*. These terms are capitalized. Ethnicity draws on a socio-constructivist conceptualization (Barth 1969; Jenkins 1994) and refers to formations evolving with and against notions of perceived shared heritage and/or origin, predominantly national and religious ones. Race draws on a socio-cognitivist hypothesis and is primarily conceptualized as a coding, cognitive/mental typecasting or/and representation (Hall 1997) e.g., Yellow for Northeast Asian.
2. *Ethnonationalism*, an abbreviation of the less reader-friendly *postcolonial monoracial ethnic nationalism*. Postmillennial research on K-nationalism demonstrates how Koreanness, through most of the postcolonial era and the Cold War years, in both South and North Korea, has been dominated by intense ethnonationalism, ethnoracial homogenization, and idealization of purity of blood (Shin 2006).

Doo-hwan regime (1980-1987) also known as the "heyday" of South Korean ICA.[3] Most of the ICAs until the mid-1980s were girls due to sexist son-preference in South Korea paired with girl-preference among adopters abroad. With negative publicity in the global press shortly before the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, South Korean ICA was criticized as "child export-import" after which the number of adoptions overseas decreased. Following a resurge in the wake of 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the number has decreased steadily since 2004 and saw a remarkable drop around 2012/2013, presumably as a result of the latest adoption law revision. At present, more than 90 percent of infants processed through the ICA system are born to and relinquished by young single women in their teens and twenties.

The transnational adoptee character first appeared in South Korean cinema in the latter part of the 1950s and has, for the past decades, been an increasingly salient figure in South Korean popular culture.[4] An explanation for this overexposure may be sought in prevalent ethnonationalist discourses of Koreanness that have been constructed around notions of fictive kin or familism (the nation as a family), canonized through a powerful master narrative of "all Koreans" as a part of the same big blood-related yet dispersed family and to which the adoptee figure constitutes a near-perfect allegory for the divided nation and family separation (Hübinette 2006, 159-60). In a wider scope, the orphan-adoptee motif is an enticing narrative propeller and lineage breaker, oft-cited in male-authored Christian canon (from Moses to more recent superheroes such as Superman and Spiderman etc.). Hoping not to exceptionalize, the transnational adoptee is a disturbing cultural and political figure that cuts across ethnoracial and cultural boundaries, constantly challenging established notions of nationhood and family, which makes it interesting and relevant to the study of shifting ideologies of kinship and Koreanness. For these and other reasons, recent years have seen a number of studies that engage with cultural representations of South Korean overseas adoptees (Chae 2004; Hübinette 2006; Jung 2008; Kim 2010; Park 2010; Yoo and Wagner 2013; Nielsen;

3. Out of norm critical considerations and following the principal of politics over readability, the anomaly *majority Korean* is used for the more common (*full*) *Korean*. *Majority* specifically refers to ethnoraciality and less to other social attributes such as class, gender, health, or age etc.

4. A number of terms for transnational adoptees from South Korea are currently in use. The term *overseas adoptee* for the Korean *hae-oeibyang* is generally preferred.

2014; Yoo 2014). A recurring assertion in these studies is that representations of adoptees are often stereotyped and that they are the product of a dominant male-authored nationalist ideology, summoning adoptees from overseas in the service of the nation. With a specific focus on representations of adoptee returnees, the ambition of present article is to contribute to the abovementioned body of studies and to offer a roadmap for other returnees. It should be added, that the employed method of critically engaging with motifs and text-embedded ideologies in the films as well as an extensive use of generic labels, necessarily involves a rough-handed reduction of these cinematic works of art.

The Adoptee Returnee in Cold War Coalition Films

Overseas adoption emerged as a theme in South Korean cinema in the late 1950s during the Golden Age of K-Cinema in retrospective colonial era or pre-modern historical *sageuk* dramas, represented as adoptions of Joseon Korean children by Chinese or Japanese nationals (Hübinette 2006). During these years, ICA is also a theme in Korean War retrospectives and films about the fate of impoverished widows and young women who labour as sex workers in US Army camptowns and relinquish their children, narrated as mixed, for adoption overseas to the imagined wealthy White West, often synonymous with the US.[5] These representations were seemingly governed by the logic that the children would have a better future in America, associated with the American dream of material wealth, mobility, and modernity, as opposed to the future awaiting them in impoverished, ethnonationalist, and densely populated South Korea. A variation of this motif is present in the film with the denigrating title *A Negro Whom I Bore/Loved* (*Nae-ga Nah-eun Geomdung-I* 1959) by Kim Han-il. The film is about a local woman named Nam-ju who, during the Korean War, is rescued by an American GI named Sack with whom she falls in love. Following his return to the US, Nam-ju bears a daughter named June who is narrated as Black Amerasian. Mother and daughter are exposed to social discrimination

5. *The wealthy White West,* an appellation that refers to a distinct Occidentalist tenet in South Korean mainstream imaginaries about Westernness, particularly Americanness. For discussion of the American dream in the South Korean imaginary, see Abelmann and Lie 1995; Kim 2008.

and June is temporarily sent to an orphanage and subsequently emigrates to the US. In this way, the mediation of emigration-narratives as in *A Negro Whom I Bore* helped propagate and establish ICA as a legitimate social practice while endorsing the myth of the ethnoracial homogeneity of Koreanness (Hübinette 2006; Yoo and Wagner 2013).

Representations of adult adoptees returning from their Western adoptive countries began emerging in the South Korean cinescape in the latter part of the 1960s and early 1970s. It is also during these early years of developmentalism and of the Republic of Korea (hereafter, ROK) engagement in the Vietnam War (which I will have more to say about later), that ICA began to boom. The first film to have an adoptee returnee from a Western country in a principal role must be the melodrama *When April Goes By* (*Sawori Ga-myeon* 1967) by Jeong Jin-u. The film follows Korean War orphan and Korean French adoptee Mun Du Pont (Mun Hui). Forcibly engaged to her adoptive brother in France, Mun returns to her country of birth for the first time in 18 years. At the airport she coincidentally meets a South Korean fellow named Seong-hun (played by the namesake actor Seong-hun) who works at the French Embassy in Seoul and whom she finds irresistible. The romance between Mun and Seong-hun, however, results in separation, as the former must return to her adoptive family in France by the end of the film. Another adoptee returnee principal character is found in *A Guilty Woman* (*Joemanh-eun Yeoin*) released in 1971 and directed by Yi Du-yong. The film circles on the impossible love between an impoverished lad named Yeong-hun (Choe Mu-ryong) who, due to class-difference, is unable to marry his childhood sweetheart Gang-ae (Yun Jeong-hui). In a state of despair Yeong-hun attempts suicide, which is prevented by a wealthy White American male tourist who adopts him to the US. Following the sudden death of his adoptive father, Yeong-hun, now a multimillionaire, remigrates to South Korea where he starts a company and plots to ruin the husband of Gang-ae. Yeong-hun, however, comes to realize the futility of winning back his sweetheart and eventually returns to his adoptive country. Adult adoptee return is also a theme in the rather bizarre anti-ICA drama *Black Butterfly* (*Heungnabi* 1974) by Byeon Jang-ho and a subtheme in the intensely melodramatic tragedy and "hostess film" *Anna's Will* (*Anna-ui Yuseo* 1975) by Choe Hyeon-min. *Black Butterfly* follows the return of a young Korean American female adoptee named Jang (U Yeon-jeong). Jang, a Korean War orphan adopted by a wealthy American family, returns to South Korea after 19 years, accompanied by her

White American husband and a group of bodyguards who are cast and coded as dwarfs. Upon arrival, she reunites with her childhood friends from the orphanage but they are soon killed under mysterious circumstances. Jang later discovers that the heinous murders are committed by the dwarfs and plotted by none other than her husband and the film ends tragically as she commits suicide thereby fulfilling a heartfelt desire to die in her country of birth. Also ending tragically, *Anna's Will* narrates the life and fate of the Korean War orphan Myeong-ae (Pak Nam-ok) who, as a young widow, becomes a GI sex worker nicknamed Anna and relinquishes her daughter for adoption to the US. Years later, after Myeong-ae/Anna has passed away, her daughter returns to mourn at her mother's grave.

Across their various differences and ideological investments, shared characteristics of these early adoptee returnee-themed films are that the returnees are narrated as majority Korean (albeit most of the ICAs in the mid-1950s pertained to children classified as mixed) and that the outcome of the attempted reconnection with South Korea is allegorized in death and/or departure with implications of permanent separation from their country of birth. There seems to be an underlying message in the films that remigration and permanent resettlement and prosperous livelihood in South Korea is not an option for the adoptee returnee. This theme-complex can be understood as an articulation of Cold War ethnonationalism in which adoption signifies an extreme form of multicultural family-making, equal to a radical and irreversible transgression of homogeneity. Conversely and ambivalently, the trope of returnee representations also harbours an alliance-theme where the adoptee figure is inscribed allegorically as an ambassadorial bridge for the international Cold War coalition between South Korea and the adoptive countries. This historical juncture, dominated by Cold War atmosphere and anti-Communism, thus comprises a "multicultural moment" as seen in a flourishing of coalition films in which positive representations of international kinship allegorizes the alliance between the nations of the "free world," particularly the US, South Korea, and Japan. Examples of such coalition films are *Goodbye John* (1964) by Song Guk in which a young local woman falls in love with a US officer who eventually dies defending the South. Also, *The Blue-eyed Daughter in Law* (*Pa-ran Nun-ui Myeo-neu-ri* 1969) by Kim Gi-deok (b. 1934, not "the bad guy") and *Once More in Your Heart* (*Geudae Gaseum-e Dasi Hanbeon* 1971) by Kim Sa-gyeom, both plotted on troublesome but ultimately

successful and happy inter marriages between well-educated South Korean men and American women.[6] An overall characteristic of this cinematic trope is that multicultural family-making between ROK, US and/or Japanese nationals is thematized either through adoption or matrimony (the latter, in principle, also a form of adoption as a "mutual" choice). In context, some hallmark events of the Japan-US-ROK alliance in the mid-1960s are the 1965-revision of the US-immigration law that re-allowed immigration from Asia, the infamous Normalization Treaty between the ROK and Japan, entered in 1965 under US-tutelage, and, the ROK engagement in the Vietnam War in 1964/1965 as part of the Southern anti-communist forces, spearheaded by the US (Armstrong 2001; Lee 2011).[7] These engagements brought new technology, investments, funds, and know-how to South Korea and thus were pivotal in kick-starting the ROK economy, leading to three decades of prodigious economic growth, monikered as "the miracle of the Han River" and "the amazing 30 years." An example of a Japan-ROK coalition and reconciliation film that inscribes the motifs of trans-ethnic adoption, adoptee return, and intermarriage, is the semi-retrospective melodrama *A Miracle of Gratitude* (*Boeun-ui Gijeok* 1967) by Yi Sang-geun in which a young man named Hideo (Nam Seong-jin) and a South Korean peer named Hye-suk (Yun Jeonghui) meet at a seminar in Japan and fall in love. It transpires that Hideo has Joseon-Korean origins but was adopted by a Japanese woman named Hanako/Hwa-ja (Kim Jimi) who presumed him orphaned when she met him upon returning home from Manchuria at the end of WWII. It eventually turns out that Hideo's biogenetic parents (hereafter, *bio-* for *biogenetic* e.g., bio-mom) are alive and well in Seoul and, by some miracle (thus the title), are none other than Hye-suk's adoptive parents. The film resolves in multicultural family happiness with the intermarriage between

6. US cinema offers a plethora of films with similar Cold War coalition themes, allegorized in interracial or international heterosexual romance, for instance *The Crimson Kimono* (1959) by Samuel Fuller and *Bridge to the Sun* (1961) by Etienne Périer. These two films stand out because the male lead (James Shigeta) is coded as Japanese American or "Yellow/Northeast Asian" and engages romantically with White American female characters. More common and pronounced is the inverse configuration of on-screen interracial romance between characters coded as Yellow Asian (American) female and White American male, for instance *Japanese War Bride* (1952) by King Vidor, *Sayonara* (1957) by Joshua Logan, or *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) by Richard Quine.

7. The article by Lee Min Yong argues that economic incentives for the ROK to engage in the Vietnam War were secondary to matters of national security. Nevertheless, the South Korean economy experienced a boom when the ROK entered the war in Vietnam.

Humiko and Hideo as if to endorse the mentioned Normalization Treaty and the anti-communist alliance between the two nations. Another pertinent example of adult adoptee return and multiple international adoptions is found in the coalition film *Between Love* (*Jeong-gwa Jeong Sai-e* 1972) by Kwon Yeong-sun in which the female principal Michie (Jo Ae-ja) is adopted to the US by a White American family named Brown during the Korean War and later readopted by a Japanese family named Ichigawa. Stigmatized as part of the Zainichi minority in Japan, she is exposed to racism and discrimination even from her romantic interest, a local Japanese guy. Michie's bio-mom who has been searching for her eventually arrives on stage and the two return together to South Korea, which may be seen as a form of third adoption. *Between Love* closes in a mode of international reconciliation when Michie declares that she plans to spend her future vacations together with her Japanese and American adoptive families.[8]

With the end of the Vietnam War, the adoptee returnee figure largely disappears from the South Korean cinescape and is gradually "replaced" by an increasing number of cinematic depictions of adoptees within their adoptive countries. These adoptee representations can be seen as part of a trope of South Korean film productions played out in the US or in Europe (hereafter, *America* or *Europe films*). This trend, facilitated by the booming economy, also reflects a rising global consciousness in the South Korean mainstream, imbued with aspiring visions of creating a global blood-based (Jus Sanguinis) K-community. South Korean cinema offers more than one hundred Europe and America films (not including a considerable number of films played out in other Asian countries mostly in Hong Kong and Taiwan) most of which evolve around the Kdiaspora abroad. In these films we often encounter the adoptee character by way of the protagonist who is a majority Korean male, sojourner, traveller, or expatriate. The, perhaps, first adoptee representation in an America film is found in *44th Street, New York* (*Nyuyok, 44beon-ga* 1976) by Yi Du-yong in which a Korean American "Yellow" adoptee named Jane who is the adoptive daughter of a NY antiquity dealer becomes part of a love triangle that ends fatally with the bloody death of the male principal named Dong-uk and involves a couple of White American bad guys and a White American woman named Peggy who desires

8. For a brief summary of these films, see Hübinette 2006, 100-02.

him (read: his irresistible K-masculinity). If not inflected by anti-ICA ideology, the brutal death of the expatriate Dong-uk seemingly sends an anti-emigration message; a discourse became more pronounced during the 1980s, by and large, concomitantly with the first popularization of anti-Americanism.[9]

Anti-ICA Films and Christian *Minjung* Ideology

During the first couple of decades after the Korean War the South Korean public generally displayed positive sentiments towards the US as well as of ICA. Anti-ICA discourse, of which *Black Butterfly* can be seen as an early articulation, emerged in the former part of the 1970s as a response to humiliating North Korean propaganda campaigns in which the Southerners were accused of selling the nation's children to "the American Capitalist vampires." Anti-ICA discourse in the South proliferated during the 1970s and was politicized in the unfulfilled ambition of the Park Chung-hee regime (1962-1979) to phase out ICA by 1982, that is, with the exception of children, classified as mixed and/or disabled (Hübinette 2006, 57).[10] As a consequence of conservative legislation, lack of funding for child welfare in conjunction with anti-communism (read: no welfare-state), a rapidly growing population and status-oriented middleclass in South Korea, and an increasing demand for adoptable infants among the emerging Western middle-class, the adoption system had spun out of control and the number of ICAs skyrocketed towards the mid-1970s.[11] In order to phase out

9. US-bound emigration from ROK to the US surged in the latter part of the 1970s and, by the mid-1980s, surpassed a staggering 30,000 per year, only to decrease in the 1990s (Noland 2003). Between 1988 and 1992 the average wage in South Korea almost doubled and the country became a destination for transnational labour- and marriage-based migration. The early 1990s also marks the beginning of actual remigration of adult overseas adoptees that evolved into the adoptee community, primarily located in Seoul.

10. A signature film for Park Chung-hee's anti-ICA policies must be the social realist melodrama *A World without a Mother* (*Eomma-eobsneun Ha-neul A-rae* 1977) directed by Lee Won-se/Yi Weon-se and scripted by Kim Mun-yeop. The film follows three small siblings' fight for survival. Following the premature and tragic death of their mom, their dad, a traumatized Korean War veteran, loses his sanity and is institutionalized. The siblings are left to themselves and fight to avoid being sent to the orphanage. The orphanage (and in turn ICA) seems unavoidable but the siblings are rescued in the eleventh hour by the local community spearheaded by a young and progressive-minded schoolteacher.

ICA, the regime revised adoption laws in 1976 and launched a series of initiatives to promote domestic adoption and foster care programs. With the sudden death of Park Chung-hee in the fall of 1979 and the installation of another masculinist military regime headed by General Chun Doo-hwan, however, the ICA system was deregulated. A primary reason for this was increasing neoliberalism paired with intense lobbyism from private and conservative Christian adoption agencies. This led to a second adoption boom and the mid-1980s are retrospectively referred to as the "heyday" of South Korean ICA. After decades of shifting dictatorial military regimes, the first democratic elections were held in 1987, shortly before the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul. With the Olympics coming up, South Korea gained attention in the global press and the flourishing ICA programs resurfaced as a political issue. A signature article for ICA-critical discourse around the time of the Olympics is "Babies for Sale: South Koreans Make them, Americans Buy them" by the American journalist Matthew Rothschild (1988). In the article, ICA is framed as a supply and demand-driven phenomenon, in effect, equal to a commodification of infants in the global market place. With the Olympics followed new promises from the ROK government to cease ICA; accompanied by a law revision, new regulations and campaigns to promote domestic adoption, which led to a remarkable decrease in the number of ICAs from the late 1980s. It is notable that this shift in the official adoption discourse towards a pro-domestic adoption ideology happened concomitantly with a sharply declining birth rate that reached a record low in 2005 when the republic had the lowest birth rate in the world. 2005 is also the year for the establishment of the national adoption day in South Korea with aim of promoting domestic adoption and the year when the Roh Moo-hyun-led administration (2003-2008) first announced its ambition to make (liberal) multiculturalism the official nation-state ideology (Kim 2007; Nielsen 2014).[12]

If we rewind a couple of decades, the mentioned revival of the anti-ICA

11. The late 1960s and early 1970s marks the official establishment of the world famous welfare state societies and ICA-systems in Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden), since to become the, per capita, primary recipient of South Korean children.

12. The adoption studies scholar Eleana J. Kim (2010, 3) aptly notes that the number of ICAs in the early years of the millennium constitutes only a fraction of the children born in South Korea. In a wider scope, the promotion of domestic adoption can well be seen as part of a biopolitical population management strategy to boost the fertility rate that involves a range of measure such as co-facilitation of intermarriages and harsher enforcement of existing anti-abortion legislation.

discourse of the 1988 Olympics finds an expression in the so-called (South) Korean new wave films and *minjung* cinema that emerged with democratization in the late 1980s. *Minjung* translates as "popular masses" and comprises a range of different peoples' movements such as anti-government coalitions of workers, farmers, dissident politicians, students, and religious activists. *Minjung* ideology gained thrust in the second half of the 1970s and is considered vital to the initiation of the democratization process. Definitions of the term the Korean New Wave vary but are here referring to revisionist and politicized films that emerged with the relaxation of censorship in 1987/1988 of which *Chilsu and Mansu* (*Chil-su-wa Man-su* 1988) by Park Kwang-su is a trailblazing/canonizing feature. The Europe film *Berlin Report* also by Park well exemplifies a new wave, *minjung* and post-Olympics anti-ICA film, depicting overseas adoptees in their adoptive countries, evolving around a complex allegory of national division, reunion, and family separation (Hübinette 2006, 164-76). Predominantly set in the suburbs of Paris, France, the film follows a South Korean male reporter named Seong-min (Ahn Sung-ki), investigating the murder of a retired military officer and aristocrat. The murder has allegedly been committed by the officer's Korean French adoptive daughter Marie-Hélène aka Yeong-hui (Kang Su-yeon), who is traumatized and suffers amnesia. It transpires that Marie-Hélène was sexually abused by her adoptive father which is the motif for the murder, committed by her bio-brother Lucien aka Yeong-cheol (Mun Seong-geun) who was also adopted to France but who has since migrated to Berlin where he lives with his girlfriend who is a Korean German adoptee. The signature film of the anti-ICA discourse in the wake of the 1988 Olympics, however, must be the social-realist melodrama and Christian *minjung* film *Susanne Brink's Arirang* (1991) which is a Swedish/South Korean co-production by Chang Kil-su, based on the real-life story of the Korean Swedish adoptee Susanne Brink (1964-2009). *Susanne Brink's Arirang* is still aired regularly on South Korean TV and has been a primary vehicle for canonizing anti-ICA discourse. The film depicts the life of the pre-teenaged girl Yu-suk who is adopted to Sweden in 1966 following the death of her dad, leaving her mom widowed impoverished and unable to provide for all her children (Hübinette 2006, 112-28). In Sweden Yu-suk is renamed Susanne Brink and the film follows her coming of age in Sweden where she is raised in ethnoracial isolation and exposed to severe harassment from her older adoptive brother and mother (both of whom are cast and coded as White Swedish), which leads to her repeated attempts of suicide. As a young

adult, Susanne (transethnically enacted by the late Choi Jin-sil [1968-2008]), portrayed as a cigarette-smoking single mom to a daughter named Eleonora who is coded as White Eurasian, is discovered by a South Korean team of TV-reporters, spearheaded by a majority Korean male figure. Aided by the K-team Susanne is able to make a temporary return to South Korea and to reunite and reconcile with her bio-mom. The return and physical reunion between Susanne/Yu-suk and her mom, however, proves to be ephemeral, as the former must return to her adoptive country by the end of the film. Susanne's encounter with the majority Korean male, return to her birth country, and reunion with her mom seemingly evokes a *uisikhwa* (politicized conscientization) or emancipatory awakening in Susanne about the social injustice of ICA, which is clearly expressed, in her famous anti-ICA-declaration, voiced in front of a group of journalists at Gimpo Airport before boarding the plane to Stockholm with her daughter:

> **Susanne.** I have heard that South Korea is a rich country but my mom is still struggling. I didn't know that this country now imports luxury goods and expensive foreign-made cars while still exporting its children. More than 110,000 children have departed from this airport, but in this strange country no one seems to care about the outcome of their lives. Yesterday before coming here pastor Chang told me that a (South) Korean boy in Sweden had committed suicide in the house of his adoptive parents. This must never happen again. No one should have to commit suicide out of pain and anguish.... (*Susanne Brink's Arirang* 1h 52m; Author's translation)

This powerful statement well captures a central tenet of the anti-ICA *minjung* discourse, pertaining to a critique of the commodification of the nations' children and call for more solidarity with the nation's poor minorities such as vulnerable and marginalized single parent households, central to ICA-critical discourse, past and present.

In sum, a characteristic feature of the female adoptee figure that runs through the adoption-themed films of the 1990s is that she is infantilized and represented as exploited and relatively passively awaiting to be decontaminated for Westernness and to be re-Koreanized in the reunion with the motherland, often by resolute intervention by the majority Korean male protagonist (Hübinette 2005, 228). This dominant narrative reflects a form of pan-Koreanism that can be traced back to the 1880s but which finds immediate expression in South Korean *segyehwa*

(globalization) discourse.[13] *Segyehwa* was repopularized in the 1980s and formalized in the early 1990s by the Protestant ROK president Kim Young-sam (1993-1998) as a social Darwinist (eat or be eaten) vision of the creation of a deterritorialized blood-based global K-community (Kim 1995; Park 1996). As argued in numerous studies (Song 1999; Hübinette 2006; Kim 2010) *segyehwa* has greatly influenced the reformulation of the ROK diaspora and adoption politics in the wake of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis.

The Asian Financial Crisis

The financial crisis hit Asia in July 1997 and, within weeks, drove the South Korean economy onto the brink of bankruptcy. The crisis that, among others, was caused by nepotism and crony capitalism, has since been termed the IMF-crisis among locals due to the humiliating high-interest IMF "rescue" package and required neoliberalization of the ROK economy (Woo-Cumings 2003). The crisis led to a temporary resurgence of anti-American sentiments and also to a temporary rise in the number of ICAs, known as "IMF-children," referring to infants relinquished due to widespread poverty as a consequence of the crisis. By the turn of the millennium, the economy had recovered on the surface, but the crisis signifies a radical transformation of South Korean society, particularly felt in an intensification of neoliberal turbo capitalism. As said, the crisis also signifies a shift in the ROK diaspora politics that can for instance be seen in the establishment of the Overseas Koreans Foundation in 1997 with the aim of promoting the relation to the brethren abroad, which according to the foundation counts a staggering +7 million heads.[14] Relevantly, the shift in diaspora politics signifies a refurbishment of the adoptee from abandoned and not-so-capable orphan to high-end urbanite, a valuable capital-heavy asset to the South Korean nation-state. The Korean

13. Simplified, pan-Koreanism, based on the idea of creating a transnational and global K-community in order to survive in a hostile world, echoes a mode of thought found in pan-Asian regionalism/pan-Asianism as first popularized in Joseon-Korea way of Japan in the 1880s. For a discussion of the early mediation of pan-Asianism in Joseon-Korea, see Tikhonov 2009.

14. One immediate outcome of this policy-shift is the inclusion of overseas adoptees in the Overseas Koreans Act (Jae-oedongpo-beop) of 1999 and more recently, the inclusion into the Dual Citizenship Act of 2010/2011. For discussion of the Anglo-friendly Overseas Korean Act and its genealogy from 1997-2004, see Park and Chang 2005.

American adoption studies researcher Eleana J. Kim (2010, 178-83) describes this "upgrade" as a resignification of overseas adoptees into a productive, if not commodified, ambassadorial bridge between South Korea and the global economy in the 21st century. In this way, following the Asian Financial Crisis, the adoptee returnee re-emerged as a prominent and reinvented figure in domestic cinema. It is furthermore remarkable that virtually all representations of overseas adoptees in South Korean cinema (and TV-dramas) since are returnees and bourgeois. There are too many representations to properly recount here but the following exemplifies and discusses some of the characteristic discursive tenets of adoptee returnee representation after the crisis.

Female Return: Fertile Bodies, Futile Reunions

Although South Korean cinema of the earlier 1990s comprises adoptee returnee representations, the signature film for the post-crisis anti-ICA discourse and the symbolic return of the adoptee returnee must be the mainstream heterosexual romance and America film *Love* (1999) by Yi Jang-su.[15] Mainly played out in a Korea Town hub embedded in the larger and multicultural LA, *Love* follows a couple of ROK male marathon runners who arrive in the US to participate in the LA marathon (Hübinette 2006, 188-99). The male protagonist Myeong-su (played by the, patriarch or not, devastatingly handsome Jung Woo-sung) who is one of the runners, soon falls in love with an adoptee named Jenny (transethnically enacted by Ko So-young). It transpires that she has run away from her adoptive family and is staying with a Korean American buddy of Myeong-su named Brad (Park Chul), possibly also an adoptee, who acts as her patron and has a crush on her.[16] Eventually, after a series of complications, Jenny and Myeong-su are able

15. The artsy Tarkovskij-styled auteur film *The People in White* (*Geom-eu-na Ttang-e hui-na Baeksong* 1995) by Bae Yong-gyun, in which a Korean American male adoptee named H (transethnically enacted by Jeon Gyu-su) returns to his desolate and industrial hometown in provincial South Korea, may be considered a trailblazer for the return of the returnee. In the dramascape, adoptee return is a theme in the not-ICA-unfriendly MBC miniseries *1.5. Generation* (April 29-June 28, 1996) by Yi Kwang-hui, in which a group of Korean American youths resettle in cosmopolitan Seoul.

16. A parallel text for the post-crisis anti-ICA discourse and the symbolic return of the adoptee returnee is the music video *Eternity* (*Yeongweon* 1999) performed by SKY: https://www.youtube.com/

to live out their mutual affection and by the end of the film have returned to their country of birth, imbued with promises of future marriage and procreation. Family-search is, needless to say, also a motif in the film as Jenny attempts to reconnect with her bio-mom in South Korea but in spite of her fluency in Korean, is unable to locate her mom. At this moment Brad resolutely steps in, traveling to South Korea to meet Jenny's mom. As it turns out, the mother is remarried with children, which renders the reunion between adoptee and bio-mom painfully impossible. As Brad explains to Jenny upon returning to LA (having discovered Jenny and Myeong-su together in the nude):

> **Brad.** Your mother is indeed virtuous (*chakhada*) and beautiful! She cried all the time from the moment I met her and until my departure. But, Jenny, South Koreans don't understand about adoptee matters. I couldn't convey your wish to meet her. (*Love* 1h 11m; Author's translation)

Brad immediately authenticates this probably well-intended yet rather patronizing message with a photograph of Jenny's mom. The photograph is a commonly used prop used in South Korean film and is often inscribed as a symbol of family separation, an irrevocable past and impossible reunion. In *Love* it reads as a nostalgic two-dimensional substitution for the absence of the maternal body, thereby denying the mother any threedimensional complexity.[17] Importantly, the impossible reunion between bio-mom and adoptee reinforces and reproduces a dominant and stereotypical male-authored fiction of female adoptee return in which the heteronormative and sexual encounter with K-masculinity signifies reimbursement and a symbolic avenue to K-womanhood and a validation of her reinclusion into the trans/national K-family. Sometimes, as in *Love*, the romantic meeting takes place in the adoptive country. Other times, during the flight en route to South Korea or immediately upon arrival at Incheon Airport

watch?v=jpYDKqKRBSY (Accessed February 12, 2015). This video features the Hallyu megastar Jang Dong Gun, also the husband of Ko So-young. Notably the motif of the orphan-adoptee migrant assassin is recurring in the "moribound" Jang Dong Gun oeuvre for instance in *The Warrior's Way* (2010) by Lee Sngmooand *No Tears for the Dead* (*U-neun Namja* lit. *Crying Man* 2014) by Lee Jeong-beom.

17. Several scholars have criticized the exclusion of the maternal figure or body in male-authored texts about adoption, for instance (Park 2010).

as in the film *Maybe* (*To-kki-wa Ri-jeo-deu* lit. *Rabbit and Lizard* 2009) by Ju Ji-hong about the adoptee May (Sung Yu-Ri) who returns to search for her bio-mom whom, as it transpires, is deceased. It should be mentioned that there are cinematic representations of angry, vengeful, and conscientized female adoptees too for instance in the early feature *Wild Animals* (1997) by Kim Ki-duk (the "bad guy"). In the film, which is played out in Paris, France, the exploited adoptee Laura (Ryun Jang), angry, re-Koreanized, and conscientized, eventually kills the male principals as an act of vengeance for the murder of her lover, possibly an allegorical revenge for Korean patriarchy's responsibility for ostracizing girls by way of adoption.[18] Or, in the erotic melodrama *Red Wild Berries 5* (*Ppalgan Aengdu 5*, 1990) by Pak Ho-tae in which a Korean American adoptee named Su-ra (Kim Cheong-a) returns to her country of birth to seek vengeance for the suffering, deception, and death of her mom. Overall, however, a dominant characteristic of cinematic representations of female adoptee returnees after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, and particularly after the second crisis in 2007 is, that they are young, beautiful, well-educated, Koreaphone (enacted by local actresses), and interpellated by devastatingly handsome majority Korean males and seemingly expected to contribute to the future prosperity of the nation with their high-end educations and fertile bodies, while consequently denied reunion with their bio-moms for whom they are almost always searching.

The Remasculinization of Adoptee Male Returnees

Re-Koreanization and unsuccessful reunion with the bio-mom is also a prevalent trait of cinematic representation of male adoptee returnees.[19] They are re-Koreanized and remasculinized through male bonding and camaraderie with local majority Korean peers and in some cases, romances with local women,

18. The vengeful adoptee returnee is also a recurring figure in the uncinematized pre-debut part of the Kim Ki-duk oeuvre (Kim 2003).

19. Adoptee return and unsuccessful reunion is also a theme in the erotic *Summertime* (2000) by Park Jae-ho, the blazing anti-ICA and vengeful single-mom noir film *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (*Chinjeolhan Geumjassi* lit. *The Kindhearted Ms. Geumja* 2005) by Park Chan-wook, the artsy indie film *A Blind River* (*Gwihyang* lit. *Homebound* 2009) by cineastress An Seon-gyeong and the Hallyufilm *Mr. Idol* (2011) by Rhee Hee-chan as well as in a considerable number of TV dramas during the same period.

which reads as a symbolic reinclusion into the big trans/national K-family and as a compensation for emasculation and effeminization, if not patriarchalization, of their "Yellow" male bodies abroad.[20] These motifs are salient in the two postmillennial features *My Father* (2007) by Hwang Donghyeok and the blockbuster *Take off* (*Gukga Daepyo* lit. *National Representative* 2009) by Kim Yong-hwa. Both films have adoptee male returnee principals and both are inspired by stories of real-life adoptees.[21] The mocking satirical melodrama *Take Off*, features the majority Korean star actor Ha Jung-woo in the role as the Korean American adoptee returnee Bob James whose Korean name is Heon-tae. The film follows the making of a ski-jumping team and is plotted on an "against all odds" formula that echoes that of the Christian *minjung* film *Lee Chang-ho's Foreign League* (*Yi Jang-houi Oein-gudan* 1986) by Lee Chang-ho and the Hollywood film *Cool Runnings* (1993) by Jon Turteltaub. Bob returns to South Korea to search for his bio-mom and in the course of events naturalizes as a ROK citizen and joins the national ski jumping team in order to enhance his chances of reuniting with his mom. Shortly upon arrival Bob appears on a family search TV program whereafter he is approached by the national ski coach named Bang (Seong Dong-il). The following exchange between Bob and Bang well illustrates a prevalent majority Korean discourse on adopteeness as well-educated and spoiled, socially unadjusted and searching:

> **Ski coach.** (in Korean) It is also possible that your Korean mother does not want to meet you, right?
> **Bob.** (in *panmal*, aggressively grabbing the coach by the neck) Don't prank about my mom, you haven't even met her!
> **Ski coach.** It's not a prank, you wretch! What do you know?! Adoptees like you returning to South Korea to search for your mothers. Most adoptees returning have turned out well. They are all doctors, accountants, and

20. For a reading of remasculinization as a theme in South Korean cinema since the 1980s, see Kim 2004/2005.

21. Supposedly *Take Off* is inspired by the real-life story of the Korean American adoptee and professional freestyle skier Toby Dawson (alias Kim Soo-cheol) (b. 1978) who won a bronze medal for the US in Mogul at the Winter Olympics in Torino in 2006. Toby Dawson has since been reunited with his bio-parents and returned to South Korea. In 2012 the South Korean city Pyeongchang was selected to host the Winter Olympics in 2018 with Dawson as a cultural ambassador for South Korea who was subsequently appointed as the coach for the ROK freestyle ski team.

> international lawyers! What about you, eh? You didn't adapt over there (in the US, ed) so you return like some an animal, eh?! You said you wanted to find your mother? Why don't you put yourself in her shoes? You wretch. If I were her, I wouldn't want to find a wretch like you. You have to let her find you, not the other way around. (*Take Off* 0h 11m; Author's translation)

The seemingly well-intended message by coach Bang is delivered in a rather insensitive prohibitive paternal voice; disciplining the adoptee returnee about the order of things in the "fatherland" and neo-Confucian logic in relation to family-search. It transpires that Bob and his younger sister were relinquished when their father passed away, leaving their mom widowed and impoverished. Their mom promised them a quick return once she had accumulated funds to buy an apartment, which did not happen. In present-day, their mom (Yi Hye-suk) is still impoverished and exploited doing house chores for an affluent Christian lady. By way of a remasculinization and re-Koreanization process, Bob gradually comes to realize the arduous struggles of his South Korean teammates who are marginalized in various ways. Bob must choose between his adoptive and birth country, allegorically represented by his former US teammates and his present ROK ones. He, not surprisingly opts for his Korean brethren, which signifies his reformation into a loyal ROK citizen and reinclusion into the big trans/national K-community. It should be mentioned that the reinclusion seems preconditioned by Korean language proficiency and also that the validity of such cultural and symbolic citizenship for adoptee returnees as well as for other diasporic and non-diasporic migrants and minorities, remains questionable (Yoo and Wagner 2013). In the final sequence of *Take Off*, the team has returned from the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics and Bob's mom, who has recognized him on television, is present at the airport. As for most other adoptee figures in South Korean cinema, the longed-for reunion between mother and son does not take place. Bob is, instead, reimbursed with a moment of nostalgia and childhood memories, symbolized in a gift from Bob's bio-mom that includes an album with pictures and drawings from before the adoption. One may hypothesize that fictionalized abnegation of family reassemblage is derived from a dominant conservative kinship ideology to which adoption is considered as an irreversible and irrevocable act while holding implications of a sense of debt to and recognition of the adoptive parents abroad and the nations they represent.

Adopting the Nation: Finding Four Fathers

With the above-mentioned logic in mind, family reunion in *My Father*, in spite of the promising title, does also not take place. The film is based on the real-life story of the Korean American returnee Aaron Bates and stars Daniel Henney in the role as the adoptee returnee James Parker.[22] The title of the film is intriguing since the bio-paternal figure is often absent in adoption-themed films and in nation narration of Koreanness, altogether, and more notably, *My Father* goes against the grain in its positive depiction of the White adoptive family, which may be reasoned in Catholic universalism that underscores the film. The film nevertheless deserves credit and attention as the first film since *Susanne Brink's Arirang* that seriously engages with issues relating to adoption and return. James, for instance, is not Koreaphone, which is also the case for the vast majority of overseas adoptees. The film is plotted on James' remigration to South Korea by way of the US Army and his search for bio-kin. The opening scene is played out at the residence of James' adoptive family in Arizona when he announces his plans to return by way of the US Army and intention of initiating a family search. Again, there is a prohibitive warning and foreboding of the impossibility of reunion but this time, somewhat surprisingly, verbalized by James' adoptive sister Sandra (Sarah Chang) who is a "Yellow" Korean American adoptee (inferred) and seemingly has a return and family-search experience: "James, just be really sure about this; you may regret it after you find them" (*My Father* 0h 1m 40s). Determined, James returns to South Korea and appears on a televised family-search program. He is subsequently contacted by a man named Hwang Nam-cheol (Kim Yeong-cheol) who is impoverished and on death row convicted for murder. Believing Nam-cheol to be his bio-dad, James initiates a relationship with the convict while bonding with his ROK army buddies (parallel to the choice between adoptive and birth country, facing Bob in *Take Off*) but when his kindhearted adoptive dad John (Richard Riehle) passes away from heart disease, James returns temporarily to the US to pay his respects. Upon return to South Korea he is further devastated as a

22. The racial doublecoding of James as both White Amerasian and Yellow/Northeast Asian may read as a reference to the beginning of South Korean ICA when most adoptees were classified as White Amerasian. In other words, Daniel Henney as a cultural figure and on-/offscreen star persona is often racialized as White Amerasian while Aaron Bates has been framed as Yellow/majority Korean.

DNA test shows that Nam-cheol is not his bio-dad. By way of retrospective internal-diegetic flashbacks it transpires that Nam-cheol was a patron and friend of James' late bio-mom and may have sought to exploit James as a publicity stunt to get off death row. It is also revealed that James' bio-mom, nicknamed Bubbles, was a dancer at a go-go bar near a US Army base. This rough truth, however, is not disclosed to James who is left under the impression that she was a chaste (according to neo-Confucian standards) kindergarten teacher. After a time of deliberation, James eventually reconciles with Nam-cheol and in turn with his country of birth, which is symbolized in the penultimate scene where he, somewhat sensationally, adopts Namcheol as a surrogate father by registering under Nam-cheol's family name thus becoming Chuncheon Korean and, importantly, transcending the passiveness of the adopted/adoptee position by becoming the adopting agent or adopter.[23] Interestingly, this motif is also present in several recent adoptee-themed films, for instance in the "women's film" and TV drama hybrid *Holly* (2013) by Bak Byeong-hwan (written by Jo Hyeon-gyeong) and in the meta-reflexive *minjung* film and road movie *We Are Brothers* (*Uri-neun Hyeongjeibnida* 2014) by Jang Jin. In *Holly* a Korean American adoptee named Su-jin, who is a world famous ballerina, returns to her country of birth to do good and to reconcile with her childhood friend Holly from the orphanage, now working as a "dancer" at an entertainment club for American soldiers. The film ends as Su-jin proxy adopts Holly's daughter Wani and brings her to New York to make her a proper ballerina. In *We Are Brothers*, which follows two recently reunited brothers' search for their mother across South Korea, it transpires that one of the brothers who is a Korean American pastor is the adoptive father of an Afro-American boy back in the US.

In the final scene of *My Father,* James has returned to the US and lives with his adoptive mom (Ilene Graff) in Arizona. Like Bob in *Take Off* James is remasculinized and reconciled with South Korea and like Jenny in *Love*, he is reimbursed for the absence of the maternal body when he receives a longed-for photograph of his late biomom provided by Nam-cheol. The sought after reunion with bio-kin does not take place, plot wise because James' bio-mom is deceased while the identity of his bio-dad remains undisclosed. Considering that *My Father* is underscored by Catholic universalism one could argue that James

23. For a reading of this motif in *My Father*, see Park 2010.

as a diasporic, and possibly mixed-raced, adoptee figure, is transnationalized through adoptive maternity in the US and *adopted* paternity in the ROK. With the Cold War coalition films in mind, this motif also reads as an allegory of the US-ROK international alliance and ultimately of global kindredness.[24] This interpretation finds support in another paternal presence in the film namely that of the Catholic prison priest Mun (Choe Jong-nyul) who convenes the meetings between James and Nam-cheol and reads as a form of proxy paternity for yet another ethnic boundary, one of global kinship. In this way, adoption, facilitated by narrative orphanization and loss, if not disruption, of bio-parental lineage translates into an orphanization-adoption-based kin-making matrix that possibly reflects an adoptive turn in ideologies of Koreanness and kinship, part of the new global and multicultural Korea.

In sum, a predominant motif in the films discussed above is family-search and impossible reunion between adoptee and bio-mom. In the fiction of the films, the most frequently cited reason for the shameful and traumatizing relinquishment of children is death, poverty, and widowhood. The governing logic may be that these are socioculturally "passable" reasons for child relinquishment in contrast to extramarital pregnancies, which, as mentioned, has been the most common reason for ICA since the 1980s. Overall, adoption in the films seems to signify an irrevocable and reversible act that renders the reassemblage of a little family once separated through ICA, impossible. This dominant narrative/fiction is hopefully about to diversify. The abovementioned *We Are Brothers*, plotted on two recently reunited brothers' (one local and one adopted abroad) search for their mom who suffers from Alzheimer's disease, offers an ephemeral reunion between bio-mom and adoptee shortly before Sang-yeon "must" return to the US at the end of the film. In the spy movie *Secretly, Greatly* (*Eunmilhage Widaehage* 2013) by Jang Cheol-soo a North Korean sleeper agent encourages a young woman to visit her son whom she relinquished for adoption to the US and in *I Came from Pusan* (*Yeongdoda-ri* 2010) by Jeon Soo-il, the young female principal In-hwa who regrets having relinquished her baby travels to France to see her child. A glance into the diegetic world of South Korean TV dramas indicates that reunion between biokin and adoptee is now explored as a possibility, for instance in the mega-

24. For a study on transracial adoption and global family-making, see Hübinette & Arvanitakis 2012.

successful and metatextual KBS drama *Unexpected You* alt. *My Husband Got a Family* (*Neongkuljjae Gulleoon Dangsin*, February 25-September 9, 2012) by Kim Hyeong-seok in which the female principal Yeon-hui who is majority Korean and a TV drama director marries a Korean American adoptee returnee named Terry Kang aka Gwi-nam (lit. male returnee) who is a doctor, adopted by Korean Americans. One possible explanation for this recent shift in reunion discourses is the passing and ratification of the revised Special Adoption Law of 2011/2012 in which family-search and improved rights for unwed birthmothers (*mihonmo-deul*) are inscribed as a so-called post adoption service. Only time can tell whether this trend signifies a paradigm shift on family reunion discourse that will find articulation in South Korean fiction film.

In Closing

Let us close this article beyond fiction film with the documentary *Resilience* (*Hoebok-ui Gil* lit. *Road to Recovery* 2009) by the Korean American adoptee returnee Tammy Chu, co-produced by the Seoul-based adoptee returnee support organization KoRoot (Bu-riui Jip). *Resilience* offers an unsentimental portrayal of the time *after* reunion in a rare transnational ambience of belongingness and vocation in both the US and the ROK. Once separated by way of ICA the film follows the Korean American adoptee Brent and his bio-mom Myungja over a two-year period in their concerted efforts to find each other (again). In the process Brent is separated from his wife and subsequently makes the difficult decision to leave his pre-adolescent daughters in the US and to relocate to South Korea in hope of developing his relation to Myungja. By the end of the film, however, he must return to the US to be with his adoptive mom who has fallen ill. *Resilience* closes with a non-diegetic on-screen text and images of Brent in the US and Myungja in South Korea:

> Brent is still in South Dakota taking care of his adoptive mother and raising his two daughters. He hopes to return to Korea someday.
> Myungja started a support group for birth mothers. She hopes all the thousands of separated families will one day reunite.

Keeping in mind that the reasons for ICA includes poverty, various forms of racial and gendered violence and discrimination, death, separation, and

unplanned (out of wedlock) pregnancies, where particularly young women are exposed to blame and social stigmatization, it is difficult not to advocate a depatriarchalization of the dominant ideologies of Koreanness and more social justice and reproductive rights and liberty for these young fellow citizens. Further, to hope that future cinematic representations of adopteeness and reunion of once separated families, hitherto often represented as an impossibility, will find a healthy diversification and thus challenge dominant ideologies of kinship and Koreanness, family-making and remaking.

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Abstract

This article concerns itself with representations of adult overseas adoptee returnees in South Korean cinema since liberation until the present/2015. Attempting to historicize these, it questions how the adoptee returnee—as a gendered and ethnoracialized figure—comments on text-embedded ideologies of Koreanness and kinship at different moments in time. It argues that adoptee returnee representation, as deployed in male-authored nation narration, has evolved in consolidation with the socio-economical, ideological and political circumstances of the day. The first part of the article traces the adoptee returnee figure as it first appeared in the films of the late 1960s and early 1970s. With the booming South Korean economy in the 1970s, the adoptee returnee figure largely disappeared from the silver screen and was "replaced" by representations of adoptees within their adoptive countries. Since the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 and the official declaration of the New Multicultural South Korea in 2005/2006, the adoptee returnee has reappeared as a salient and refurbished figure in the cinescape, which can be considered as "a return of the returnee" (thus the title). The second part of the article offers a closer reading of returnees and family reunion discourse in postmillennial films.

Keywords: South Korean cinema, Koreanness, intercountry adoption, diaspora, Return Migration

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