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# The Forgotten Childhoods of Korea: Ounie Lecomte's *A Brand New Life* (2009) and So Yong Kim's *Treeless Mountain* (2009)

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes two films from 2009 that are not only striking in their use of children as protagonists but also noteworthy in returning to the once-popular subject of abandoned children: So Yong Kim's *Treeless Mountain* and Ounie Lecomte's *A Brand New Life*. The significance of these two works lies in their similar narratives of abandonment and journeying but also in the comparable backgrounds of the filmmakers as Westerners with Korean origins. Both filmmakers left Korea as children. Both films were created as mementos of the filmmakers' Korean roots and childhoods in Korea. This article's analysis of the films is twofold. First, a textual reading reveals child perspectives and their matching visuals as playing crucial roles in understating—or concealing even—the gravity of the issues of abandonment and adoption embodied in the narratives. Second, the author discusses the “accented context” of the films and their filmmakers, borrowing from Hamid Naficy's theory of “accented cinema” (2001). The geographic and thematic return to Korea and the Korean family by these Western-Korean filmmakers brings forth questions beyond the narratives, of what constitutes a Korean film and a Korean experience.

**KEYWORDS:** Korean film, Korean cinema, diaspora, accented cinema, Ounie Lecomte, So Yong Kim, children, abandonment, adoption

The subject of abandoned children is deeply significant in South Korea's modern history (hereafter, Korea). The Korean War (1950–1953) led to a steep increase in the number of orphans, and the postwar era saw children suffer from war-torn families, social unrest, and general poverty. The international adoption of Korean children began during that time. The process started with the adoption of war orphans and “GI babies”—the offspring of Western soldiers and Korean women. The success of international adoption during the 1950s and 1960s, however, resulted in transnational adoption becoming an institutionalized social welfare practice by the 1970s (E. Kim 2010, 5). During the 1980s, most of the leading Western magazines and newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Herald Tribune*, and *The Daily Telegraph* extensively covered the issue of Korean children's international adoption. However, it was Matthew Rothschild's 1988 article titled, “Babies for Sale: South Koreans Make Them, Americans Buy Them,” in *The Progressive* that really opened up the debate (Rothschild 1988). That investigative feature played a crucial role in portraying the Korean state as a full-scale business selling its own children. By the late 1980s, Korea's biggest export was said to be babies (Chira 1988), and internationally adopted Koreans came to be known as “Korea's lost children” (BBC World Services 2010).

Although the social significance of this topic remains prevalent today, it has rarely been the theme of contemporary films. In some ways, this dearth of attention is hardly surprising; the subject of abandonment (and by extension, adoption) remains taboo in present-day Korean society, due international criticism that Korea received in the 1980s as well as the social stigmas that surround the reasons for abandoning infants. More importantly, in the current South Korean cinematic climate of blockbusters and thrillers, children and childhoods have not been central narrative topics. The child's role in commercial films has been largely peripheral.<sup>1</sup> Although some independent films have explored childhoods—from the well-known *The Way Home* (*Chibŭro*, directed by Yi Chŏng-hyang, 2002) to the lesser-known *With a Girl of Black Soil* (*Kŏmmŭn ttangŭi sonyŏwa*, directed by Chŏn Su-il, 2007)—children have by and large been absent from the contemporary cinematic landscape.

Two films from 2009 stand out not only for their refreshing portrayals of children as protagonists, but also for returning to the subject of abandoned

children.<sup>2</sup> Ounie Lecomte's debut film *A Brand New Life* (*Yöhaengja*) depicts the journey of a nine-year-old girl whose father has left her at an orphanage. So Yong Kim's *Treeless Mountain* (*Namu ömnün san*) tells the story of two sisters as they are passed among various family members after their father leaves the family and their mother emigrates to America to start a new life. Released only two months apart, the two films share many layers of similarities: a focus on child characters, comparable narratives on abandonment and journeying, and even similar production backgrounds. But arguably the most significant factor tying the two films together is the comparable backgrounds of the two filmmakers. Both filmmakers are Westerners with Korean origins who left Korea as children and now live abroad—Lecomte in France and Kim in the United States. Returning to Korea temporarily with the purpose of producing these films, the two autobiographical works are based on each filmmaker's childhood memories of their Korean roots and childhood experiences in Korea.

The significance of these two films, like their similarities, is multilayered. On a diegetic level, the films are interesting in terms of their narratives of abandonment and their allusion to broader social issues, such as international adoption, broken families, and the Korean diaspora. Yet the significance of the narratives must be explored alongside the visuals of the films, which are careful not to oversentimentalize the narratives. Both films remain steadfastly focused on maintaining a child's perspective, which is communicated not through an adult's usual modes of communication, such as dialogue, but instead by camerawork. Furthermore, whereas the narrative focus on children and striking visuals are certainly noteworthy in terms of their cinematography, *A Brand New Life* and *Treeless Mountain* become all the more interesting in light of their production backgrounds and the backgrounds of the filmmakers. The geographic and thematic return to Korea and the Korean family by these Western-Korean filmmakers also brings forth larger questions beyond the narratives concerning what constitutes a Korean film and a Korean experience.

My analysis of these two films is thus twofold. First, through a textual reading of the films, I argue that the focus on child perspectives allows the contentious social issues of the narratives to become "camouflaged" behind the children's eyes and the matching camerawork. Because the films follow the child's perspective, and each child's understanding of her situation

is limited, the films can neither fully develop nor comment on the issues embedded in the children's situations.

Second, I follow this textual analysis with a discussion of what I call, borrowing from cultural historian Hamid Naficy's theory, the "accented context" of the two films and their filmmakers. Naficy (2001) coined the term "accented cinema" in his eponymous book to describe the filmmaking of postcolonial, Third World, and other displaced ("deterritorialized") individuals living in the West. Although the experience of expatriation varies from person to person, Naficy reveals that accented films display certain stylistic similarities: from their open- and closed- aesthetic forms, to their nostalgic and memory-driven narratives, and ultimately to their emphasis on identity and transgression of identity. Although Naficy does not investigate any Korean filmmakers, the concept is directly applicable to the Korean context, in which a large body of works by Korean diasporic filmmakers—adoptees, immigrants, and generations of ethnic minorities—remain largely unexamined in the context of their Korean identity. Although this article uses accented theory to explore only two films in the case of a Korean American's and an adoptee's experiences, it aims to provoke broader questions regarding the boundaries of Korean cinema in the hope of stimulating further research into "accented" Korean works.

With these broader issues in mind, I have titled the article "The Lost Childhoods of Korea"—a play on the title *Korea's Lost Children*, a 2010 BBC documentary on Korean war orphans and Korea's intense history of international adoption. This title acknowledges that the lost childhoods of modern-day Korea include economic orphans and other diasporic Koreans who left Korea during childhood, in addition to war orphans and GI babies.

#### A BRAND NEW LIFE AND TREELESS MOUNTAIN

*A Brand New Life* and *Treeless Mountain* are both low-budget independent films that received limited distribution and screening. Released a mere two months apart, *A Brand New Life* had sixty screenings with fewer than eighteen thousand viewings, whereas *Treeless Mountain* received fewer than eight thousand viewings in a mere thirty-five screenings. More importantly, both films were projects undertaken by the Asian Project Market (formerly known as the Pusan Promotion Plan), a platform provided by the Busan

Film Festival (BIFF) enabling filmmakers to meet prospective financiers for projects.<sup>3</sup> *Treeless Mountain* was a project that started in 2005 as a coproduction between Korean and French companies, and *A Brand New Life* was a project from 2008 between Korean and American companies.

In addition to their almost identical production backgrounds, the two films share parallel narratives that revolve around children. The protagonist of *A Brand New Life* is nine-year-old Jin-hee, played by child actress Kim Sae-ron. One day, Jin-hee's father takes her on a "trip," but the journey only serves his purpose in abandoning the child at a girls' Catholic orphanage. Convinced that her stay at the orphanage is temporary and that her father will come back for her, Jin-hee struggles—at times violently—to come to terms with her abandonment. After several attempted escapes and many tantrums, Jin-hee gradually adjusts to life in the orphanage and befriends a fellow orphan named Suk-hee. Although she still holds onto the hope that her father may return for her, Jin-hee warms to the idea of adoption if she can be adopted into a family with Suk-hee. However, when Suk-hee is adopted alone and leaves for America, Jin-hee eventually lets go of the hope of her father's return. The final scene shows Jin-hee traveling to France to meet her adoptive parents.

*Treeless Mountain* follows the journey of two sisters: six-year-old Jin and her younger sister Bin. The film starts with the premise that their father has recently left the family. During one summer, the girls are left with their *komo*, the father's elder sister, while the mother searches for their absent father. Suddenly taken out of school and away from their accustomed life in Seoul, the two girls are thrown into Korean country life with an aunt who is less than pleased with the responsibility of taking care of them. Although they wait daily, the mother does not return. Instead, a letter comes from the mother asking the aunt to take the girls to their grandparents' farm, because the mother no longer has the means to support them. Passed along like unwanted goods among family members, the girls arrive at their grandparents' farm deflated and disillusioned. However, through the grandmother's care and love, the girls slowly begin to accept their new lives. Although the film ends without easy resolution, the final scene depicts the girls' upbeat singing as they assist their grandmother with her farm work.

The first and foremost commonality between the two films is the comparable trajectory of the narratives: in both films, child characters experience a change in their familial circumstance, which not only takes them

away from their physical homes but also requires them to redefine in their own ways their understanding of family. This narrative trajectory of abandonment, emotional struggle, and eventual acceptance is the journey that these children must take. In fact, the Korean title of *A Brand New Life* is *Yöhaengja*, which translates as “traveler”—perhaps a euphemism for adoptees. Although the English title, *A Brand New Life*, refers to the outcome of the journey, the Korean title, like its narrative, emphasizes the journey itself.

The journeys of both films begin with abandonment. For Jin-hee in *A Brand New Life*, abandonment is direct and sudden, whereas for the sisters in *Treeless Mountain*, it is a gradual process of neglect and being cast aside. Although we, as adult viewers, immediately understand their situations, the child characters take longer to perceive their abandonments. As the narratives follow the children’s experiences, neither film becomes sentimental—an adult’s response to the situation—but simply follows the children’s confusion and disorientation. In conveying the children’s emotions, both filmmakers are careful not to include adult language, such as dialogue. Instead, the emotional responses of the children are visualized through close-ups, shot compositions, and events captured from the children’s physical sightlines.

*A Brand New Life* opens with a sequence of short scenes depicting Jin-hee’s final day with her father. As she rides a bicycle with him, goes shopping with him, and sings a song to him over dinner, the camera captures only Jin-hee in a series of close-ups. Even in scenes in which Jin-hee is interacting with her father, only fragments of the father are seen, such as his hands or his back. Although his voice is heard, his face is never captured. Only after arriving at the orphanage does Jin-hee realize that something is wrong. She then looks at her father for what turns out to be the last time. It is only then that the camera finally reveals the father’s face.<sup>4</sup> The heavy use of close-ups as initiated in this scene continues throughout the film, emphasizing the film’s focus on the child’s disorientated experience and confused perspective.

*Treeless Mountain* also uses close-ups to record the children’s every reaction. In the opening scene, the camera stays—at times uncomfortably—zoomed in on the eldest daughter. When Jin studies in school, the camera frames only Jin’s facial expressions (in fact, the school setting is made known merely through the overheard voice of a teacher); when Jin walks home, the camera trails behind her; when Jin is scolded by her mother, the camera only shows Jin’s face. In such ways, viewers are denied the full picture and

presented with only fragments of each scene in both films. Yet, the viewer is nonetheless able to discern the situation through sound and setting, and the limited visuals become powerful tools for narrating the stories from the children's perspectives. Such focus on children's points of view plays a crucial role in understating—or even concealing—the gravity of the issues of abandonment and adoption that are embodied in these narratives.

Although the journeys depicted in both films begin with spatial displacement, they take on a more emotional form as the children undergo homelessness, wandering, and loss. As in the opening scenes, the children's emotions are conveyed mainly through camerawork. In *A Brand New Life*, the camera often acts on behalf of Jin-hee to display her feelings of frustration, isolation, and longing. When Jin-hee decides to run away from the orphanage and climbs its gate in an attempt to escape, a staff member opens the gates and tells Jin-hee to leave if she wants. Jin-hee quietly climbs down from the gate and leaves the property, but soon realizes that she has nowhere to go. As Jin-hee slowly walks away from the orphanage, the gates continue to surround her, visually reinforcing her trapped situation (figure 1). Unsurprisingly, the next scene reveals that Jin-hee returned to the orphanage. These gates are used throughout the film in a similar manner to display the orphans' "caged" situation.

At other times, the camera simply becomes Jin-hee. When the camera stays at Jin-hee's physical height, viewers see what Jin-hee sees and thus experience the world from her standpoint. For example, on the day Jin-hee arrives at the orphanage, she hides in the bushes, refusing to go inside. In this scene, the camera joins Jin-hee in her tight space inside the bushes. As the other children try to get her out of the shrubbery, the camera alternates between a shot of the other orphans grouped together and of Jin-hee alone, displaying her sense of isolation. When the children stand up to go inside for dinner, their upper halves are cut out of the shot as the camera remains at Jin-hee's crouched-down height. When the nuns approach Jin-hee to tell her to come inside for dinner, the camera stays in the same position and viewers watch the nuns bending over and talking into the camera, as the viewers have become Jin-hee. In this way, the scene alternates between close-up shots and over-the-shoulder shots. This technique is frequently used in both films, with close-ups reflecting the child's experience and emotions and over-the-shoulder shots conveying the child's literal perspective.





FIGURE 1. As Jin-hee walks away from the orphanage, its gates continue to surround her, visually reinforcing her trapped situation. *Source:* Screenshot of *A Brand New Life* (2009).

For Jin-hee, the greatest obstacle is accepting her abandonment. As Adam Hartzell (2009) notes, it is presumed that Jin-hee is “an economic orphan,” meaning that it was in the child’s best interest to be taken to an orphanage, as the biological family could not provide for her. Unable to fathom such reasons at her age, Jin-hee’s own search for an explanation of her abandonment is, in Hartzell words, in “heart-wrenching vein” (2009). On her first night at the orphanage, Jin-hee wakes in the middle of the night to find other children playing Korean “flower cards” (*hwat’u*). In their reality of abandonment where the future seems so unpredictable and uncontrollable, the children’s naïve hope lies in these picture cards, which they believe predict their future. In this scene, the cards reveal that a guest will arrive. Unaware of Jin-hee’s presence, one of the younger girls says that a guest has indeed come: the new girl. But Ye-jin, the eldest orphan, who has remained at the orphanage due to her disability, corrects the girl. Ye-jin (played excellently by Go A-sung) says, “She’s not a guest. She’s now going to live with us. So she’s family.” Ye-jin’s comment here is crucial to the narrative as it is the only moment when a different meaning of family for orphans is directly articulated. On hearing Ye-jin’s comment, Jin-hee breaks down in tears.

Once again, the camerawork depicts her confusion and isolation; Jin-hee is shown alone, and the other orphans are grouped together.

*Treeless Mountain* takes a slightly different approach in depicting the children's emotional journey. Unlike director Lecomte, who focuses on the child's transition from confusion to acceptance, director Kim simply follows the children and documents their daily activities. An example of this approach can be seen in a short scene near the beginning of the film in which the mother leaves the two girls on the sidewalk while she goes to look for their aunt. Although she tells them not to go anywhere, the younger sister suddenly wanders off, and tension immediately builds for viewers in anticipation of the dangerous situations that could follow. However, rather than fulfilling the adult viewers' expectations, the camera simply joins little Bin on her short adventure as she wanders around a nearby fish market. As the camera alternates between close-ups of different kinds of fish and Bin's reactions to them, the adult's worried response slowly disappears, and viewers slowly become just as innocently lost in the child's curiosity. By focusing on the children's activities in this way, Kim is able to truly depict a child's perspective, even in a situation as baffling as abandonment.

To cinephiles, this approach to filmmaking and storytelling calls to mind Kore-eda Hirokazu's depiction of abandoned children in *Nobody Knows* (2004), a film about the daily struggles of four siblings, each of whom has a different father. Their mother leaves them to live with another man. In several interviews, *Treeless Mountain* director So Yong Kim remarked that she was inspired by *Nobody Knows*.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps in light of this influence, Kore-eda's description of the children's world in *Nobody Knows* is applicable to *Treeless Mountain*:

I am confident that the world they inhabited was more than a greyish hell. There must have been a kind of richness in their lives different from the richness of material abundance . . . . Do we not have a responsibility to imagine the richness they must have known, instead of condemning them, in our ignorance of their experience, to hell? (quoted in Lury 2010, 41)

This comparison is not meant to suggest that the children in *Treeless Mountain* are without emotional struggles. However, unlike Jin-hee's pain in *A Brand New Life*, made apparent both narratively and visually, Jin and Bin's

hardship is portrayed subtly through their earnest attempts to bring back their mother. Before she leaves, the mother gives the girls a small piggy bank and promises to return when it is full. Taking their mother's promise literally, the girls spend the summer trying to speed up her return by selling grasshoppers and filling up the piggy bank with smaller change (*sip-wŏn*) as opposed to larger coins (*paek-wŏn*)—the equivalent of changing dimes into pennies. The piggy bank gets full, but instead of their mother's return, the girls receive a letter of more displacement, asking the , asking the aunt to take them to their grandparents.

The futility of these innocent activities is further emphasized in a crucial scene, to which the title of the film refers. Throughout the film, the girls pass their days on top of a hill, looking down at the bus stop to see if their mother has returned. Bored of waiting, the girls attempt to plant a twig on the hill of rocks and dirt. The girls eventually succeed in making the twig stand upright by surrounding it with rocks; they believe that they have successfully planted a tree on a treeless mountain. Of course, adult viewers know that the twig has no roots and will therefore bear no fruit. This act of planting a twig on a heap in the hopes that it will become a tree seems metaphoric of the girls' futile efforts to bring back their mother. However, like all subjective works, this scene could be interpreted differently. For example, viewers might see the children's success at getting the twig to stay upright as a kind of hopefulness that highlights the children's innocence against nature and reality's judgment deeming such acts as impossible and foolish. Regardless of interpretation, it is critical to note that the scene is captured from a disturbingly close distance. The series of close-ups disorients viewers, making it difficult to recognize the importance of this scene and its connection to the title of the film. The overall effect is that this scene (and the children's activity in it) is not emphasized any more than the other activities of the children throughout the film, thus actually deemphasizing an important moment in the film. This tendency to reduce the prominence of significant scenes is explored further later in the article.

By the end of both films, the physical destinations of the children's journeys become insignificant as these girls learn to accept their new lives. In *A Brand New Life*, acceptance comes with an act of rebirth for Jin-hee. After losing her only friend at the orphanage, Jin-hee asks the principal to find her father. The principal tells her that her father is never coming back and she

must therefore “find new parents, a new family, here at the orphanage.” The following scenes show Jin-hee digging. First, she digs up a dead bird that she and Suk-hee had buried. Then she digs until she has dug a hole big enough to fit herself. She climbs into the hole and buries herself. The camera once again alternates between capturing Jin-hee’s facial expressions and showing Jin-hee’s perspective of her own hands digging and covering herself with earth. Finally, Jin-hee covers her face with earth and remains silent and static, as though death has come. Only a few seconds later, however, she shakes off the earth and breathes again. The next scene shows Jin-hee at the principal’s office looking at a photo of Western parents, and the film swiftly ends with Jin-hee’s adoption by a French family. The moment that Jin-hee shakes off the earth captures her ultimate acceptance of reality and her desire to live. As one critic writes, “She learns that the desire to die in desperation is the same as the one to live a passionate life” (Hwang 2009).

The essence of this scene involving self-burial, clearly the climax of the film, lies in the idea of the end of childhood. The twentieth-century French film critic André Bazin perceived that audiences quickly become enraptured and teary when children show feelings that are unusually associated with grown-ups: “We are thus seeking to contemplate ourselves in them: ourselves plus the innocence, awkwardness, and naiveté we lost” (2011, 57). Although Bazin’s description here is in reference to the role of child characters in war films, this observation applies well to the burial scene that is so moving to adult viewers. Its power lies in the unspoken fact that Jin-hee’s decision to accept her abandonment reflects her progress from childhood to maturity. The visualization of the end of childhood and innocence as a kind of death where Jin-hee literally buries herself only adds to film scholar Karen Lury’s description of childhood as something that “is now actually dead to the adult who survives” (2010, 111).

Furthermore, this scene appropriately takes place in the bushes. In describing the forest settings in *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* by the Brothers Grimm, American folklorist Jack Zipes describes the forest as a place where children “lose and find themselves.... The forest possesses the power to change lives and alter destinies” (2002, 65). The forest is indeed the most archetypal setting in fairy tales where many literary child characters interact with their wildest imaginations. Given this tradition of writers using the forest to play up a child’s imagination, otherness, and general childlikeness, it is ironic that

*A Brand New Life* uses bushes—a variation on the forest—as the place where Jin-hee leaves behind the innocence of childhood. In a way, it is fitting that childhood is buried in the place where so many fairy-tale children become lost but wiser through adventure, a process that ultimately allows them to find their way back home. For Jin-hee, the wisdom gained is that of acceptance, and the way back home is revealed to be adoption. It should be noted that these complex emotional transformations are conveyed in this climatic scene without the use of any dialogue.

Like Jin-hee, the girls in *Treeless Mountain* learn to let go of their longing. The piggy bank is employed as a metaphor for the children's letting go. After they arrive at their grandparents' farm, the girls' pain and scars slowly heal. On seeing their grandmother's torn shoes, the girls decide to give their piggy bank to her, telling her to use the coins to buy a new pair of shoes. This act of giving up their piggy bank symbolizes the girls' final acceptance of their reality. Having let go of their bitterness and anger toward their mother, the girls (as revealed in the following and final scene of the film) are finally living each day rather than simply wasting each day with futile attempts to plant trees on treeless mountains. The children are shown singing as they assist with their grandmother's farming. In conveying the children's ultimate acceptance of their situation, the camera presents the audience with an extreme long shot for the first time, which serves a double function. On the one hand, viewers feel a sort of relief from the claustrophobic series of close-ups that had inundated the film until this moment. Yet that relief is not simply a reflection of the aesthetics but also laden with emotion. If the close-ups throughout the film acted as an expression of the children's disorientation and confusion, the long shot in this scene becomes a metaphor for the children's steady states of mind. As the children are no longer disorientated by their situation, viewers are also finally allowed to see the children wholly in their current circumstances. As in *A Brand New Life*, the cinematography becomes the key communicator of this climatic moment of *Treeless Mountain*.

#### THE ACCENTED CONTEXT

This analysis has so far explored the narrative of abandoned children and the corresponding cinematography that reflects the children's points of view.

However, the significance of the child perspectives lies beyond the textual level. The focus on child characters and the matching cinematography functions to dampen the sentimental response that is warranted by the diegetic situations. But rather than spotlighting the children's hardship, the films seem to be camouflaging the social issues—such as abandonment, broken families, lack of social welfare, and international adoption—that crop up in the narratives. In this sense, one could argue that children are the tools that these films use to engage with contentious social issues surrounding the Korean family.

These issues are not only embedded in the narratives but also interrelated with their filmmakers and their comparable backgrounds. Both filmmakers are Koreans living abroad—one might call them diasporic Koreans—and both films are largely autobiographical. Their basis in personal experience and the resulting parallels between the child protagonists and the filmmakers are far from concealed. The overarching storyline of *A Brand New Life* was entirely autobiographical, drawing on Lecomte's childhood journey from abandonment to adoption. Born in Seoul, Lecomte was left at the age of ten by her father at an all-girls orphanage owned by a Catholic foundation in the Seoul suburbs. She stayed at the orphanage for a year before being adopted by a French Protestant family. The film is set in 1970s in suburban Seoul. *Treeless Mountain* is also an autobiographically inspired feature. Kim remarks that the story was based on a period in her early childhood in Pusan, Korea, when her mother divorced her father and left Kim and her younger sister with their grandparents on a farm. Kim's mother emigrated to America, and Kim and her sister later joined her and grew up as Korean Americans. In the press release for the film, Kim wrote, "At the time of these events, we were too young to understand and our mother did not tell us what was happening." Hence, the story of Jin and Bin was written "to search for certain lost memories from this period of my life and also as a letter to my mother" (S. Y. Kim 2009). Lecomte and Kim are still based in France and America, respectively. They went to Korea to make these films.

The autobiographical nature of the films recalls Hamid Naficy's theory of "accented cinema." Naficy (2001) coined this a term to describe the filmmaking of displaced ("deterritorialized") individuals living in the West. The "accent" does not refer so much to an accented speech of diegetic characters (as one might assume) but, as Naficy explains, to "the displacement of the

filmmakers and their artisanal production modes”; “If the dominant cinema is considered universal and without accent, the films that diasporic and exilic subjects make are accented” (2001, 4). Indeed, Lecomte’s and Kim’s works are accented, or segregated from both mainstream Western and Korean cinemas, in several ways. First, the filmmakers have identities as outsiders to the mainstream industries. The consequent independent production of the films, not to mention the collaboration with foreign production companies, reveals their “accent” from mainstream Korean cinema. Meanwhile, the stylistic characteristics and themes explored in the narratives also resonate with Naficy’s accented theory.

Naficy writes that accented films are, on the whole, characterized as “fragmented, multilingual, epistolary, self-reflexive . . . doubled, crossed, [with] lost characters . . . dysphoric, euphoric, nostalgic, synesthetic, liminal” and as having “subject matters and themes that involve journeying, historicity, identity, and displacement” (2001, 11). Such themes of journeying, home seeking, homelessness, border crossing, identity crossing, and the imagined homeland are all in play in *A Brand New Life* and *Treeless Mountain*. Not only do the overarching narratives outline the journeys undertaken by the child characters, but they also specifically involve physical displacement from home, a crisis in homelessness, and an emotional adaptation to the understanding of the family and the self. Although the films focus on the filmmakers’ “defamiliarization” rather than their “deterritorialization,” the events of the narrative also ultimately lead to the “border crossing” of the protagonists as well as the filmmakers into new territory.

Furthermore, the authorship of Lecomte and Kim’s works, like in accented films, is not solely one of parentage but also one of performance. In parentage, the author is the creator of—and the inspiration behind—the work, whereas a performance role refers to the author’s active participation in the work. Naficy explains that the author’s “mode of habitation” in an accented text is not always literal; it can be only visual (appearing or acting in a film) or only vocal (narration), or it can be as fictional characters, what Naficy describes as “author surrogates” (2001, 6). In these ways, accented filmmakers engage in the performance of the self through their works. In both Lecomte and Kim’s films, the child protagonists are clearly surrogates of the filmmakers’ childhood selves, allowing the filmmakers to relive and explore their childhood memories through their works.



It is interesting that both filmmakers chose not to focus on the displacement experienced in a new country, but rather on their early childhoods spent in Korea prior to emigration. Naficy writes that accented filmmakers, while not returning to their homelands, “maintain an intense desire to do so—a desire that is projected in potent return narratives in their films” (2001, 12). However, Kim and Lecomte do not explore the idea of returning to the homeland in their films. Rather, by focusing on their childhoods in Korea, both filmmakers inevitably reconstruct a Korea of the past—literally creating an imagined homeland of the past, which fits Naficy’s observation that accented filmmakers “memorialize the homeland by fetishizing it in the form of cathected sounds, images, and chronotopes” (2001, 12).

Accented films typically “create a utopian prelapsarian chronotope of the homeland that is uncontaminated by contemporary facts” (Naficy 2001, 152). Such an imagined depiction of the homeland is apparent in both *A Brand New Life* and *Treeless Mountain*, as the films attempt to create a “nostalgic memorization” of Korea as opposed to portraying the Korea of today. Although there is no subtext placing either of the films in the past, the general setting establishes that both films are set in 1970s–1980s South Korea.

For example, the general lack of high-rise buildings and bright neon signs in *A Brand New Life* identify the setting as rural Korea. The tinted cinematography, the clothing of the characters, and the props in the orphanage suggests a past era. A pop song that Jin-hee sings at the beginning and the end of the film confirms the period as the 1970s (“You May Not Know” by pop singer Hye Eun Yi was one of the most popular songs of that decade).

The history of adoption also alludes to the 1970s and 1980s as the most likely time period for the narrative. The Refugee Relief Act of 1953 initially opened the door for American families to adopt orphans under the age of ten, in order to care for war orphans and biracial children left by military servicemen deployed in Korea. Thereafter, inter-country adoption expanded dramatically in the United States, peaking in the 1980s. Former South Korean presidents Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo-hwan’s overseas adoption programs from the late 1960s through the mid-1980s, as well as several other factors, contributed to the rise in abandonment and adoption during the 1970s and 1980s. Whereas the first wave of adoptees from Korea tended to be mixed-race children, the reasons for adoption shifted during this period. Industrialization and urbanization are recognized to have contributed to



the increase in rates of out-of-wedlock teen pregnancies and divorce. In the wake of late-1980s criticism from Western media accusing Korea of being a baby-exporting nation, during the early 1990s the Korean government set an overseas adoption quota, which drastically reduced overseas adoption. Considering that the 1970s and 1980s had the highest numbers of overseas adoptions with 46,035 and 66,511, respectively, in contrast to the 1990s with 22,925 (Gill 2017, 17), this becomes the most likely time period for the story of *A Brand New Life*.

*Treeless Mountain* seems more concerned with presenting a general sense of nostalgia than depicting a realistic setting in a specific time. Although the film's time frame is less obvious, the tinted cinematography and props generally evoke feelings of nostalgia. In addition, catching and eating grasshoppers—an activity in which the children engage during much of the narrative—is a memory of children of the 1960s and 1970s, not the contemporary generation. More significantly, the mother communicates to the aunt through a letter as opposed to a modern mode of communication, such as a phone call. Although mobile phones are present in the film—albeit older flip phones, another clue to the earlier era—the filmmaker's choice to present the mother's message through letter writing is not only a wistful reminiscence of the past but also distinctly characteristic of accented films. This longing for a Korea of the past, along with the fictionalization of their childhood memories, may be a means by which both filmmakers revisit, remember, and preserve their Korean identities.

Interestingly, both filmmakers choose to present the films as entirely “Korean” and not as hybrids of the filmmakers' two identities. Both films are set in Korea, use the Korean language, and feature all-Korean casts, like any other Korean film. In fact, without information on the filmmakers and the production backgrounds, the average viewer might not recognize the accented contexts of the films. A more typical accented narrative might have included the return of the filmmakers' surrogate characters to Korea. In fact, Lecomte's original script was about a French woman visiting Seoul to find her roots (Hwang 2009). Lecomte intended to play herself and employ another director for the film. On the advice of director Lee Chang-dong, one of the producers of *A Brand New Life* whom Lecomte had met during his visit to France for the release of his film *Secret Sunshine* (Millyang, 2007), Lecomte decided to direct a film that reflected on her memories of the transitory time

between two worlds. Kim's decision to focus on childhood events for *Treeless Mountain* is not entirely surprising. Her debut feature *In Between Days* had already taken as its basis her teenage memories of first arriving in America.

By taking on the appearance of Korean films, both works become significantly more important under the umbrella of Korean cinema. The films are not only beautiful works featuring child characters but also rare cinematic testimonies to the childhoods experienced in Korea by those no longer considered Korean. Despite the pertinence of the topic of abandoned children (particularly in the case of adoptees) to Korean society, a look at the concurrent reviews reveals that Korean reviews failed to acknowledge the significant contribution made by these films. Instead, the two films were simply praised for using cinematography that successfully embodied the child-protagonists' perspectives (Mun 2009). These reviews neglected the commentary that *A Brand New Life* makes on Korea's history of international adoption and the insight that *Treeless Mountain* provides into the community of Korean filmmakers living outside Korea.

The Korean film industry's tendency to exclude works made by and/or about Koreans with bicultural diasporic identities has resulted in an absence of their stories from Korean cinema. Granted, ethnic Korean minorities recently have appeared more regularly in commercial works, and documentaries or independent productions on *Chosŏnjok* (ethnic Koreans living in China), *Koryŏ saram* (ethnic Koreans living in the former Soviet Union), or North Korean refugees have increased. However, scholars have noted that commercial films depict the outsider positions of minorities mostly for either comic or thriller purposes (Bae 2016, 239). Whereas the journeys of ethnic Korean minorities who return to Korea have received attention, the stories of diasporic Koreans who remain outside Korea have failed to win the attention of Korean filmmakers. Yet not only is the population of Koreans residing abroad substantial—Korea is estimated to have the fifth largest overseas population, surpassed only by the Chinese, Jewish, Indian, and Italian diaspora (Schwekendiek 2011, 220)—but a considerable number of films by and about the Korean diaspora are being made outside Korea. In North America alone, several media arts organizations are dedicated to supporting and funding a wide range of films *by* Asian Americans, *about* Asian Americans, and *for* Asian Americans, such as Visual Communications in Los Angeles, Asian CineVision in New York, and the National Asian-American Telecommu-

nication Association in San Francisco (Naficy 2001, 63). Included in these projects are many works by Korean Americans. Yet these representations are barely acknowledged in Korea and the Korean film history.

In addition, one-third of all international adoptions between 1958 and 2004 were from Korea, which signifies a vast community of internationally adopted Koreans in the diaspora (Schwekendiek 2011, 220). Representations of adopted Koreans have appeared in Korean culture in a diverse range of media: from academic articles to newspapers, research reports to novels, television dramas to documentaries, feature films to pop songs, and paintings to poems. Yet, this interest has been limited mainly to the independent and scholarly spheres. The occasionally more commercial works have been, more often than not, whitewashed with sentimentality, as in the television shows dedicated to finding the biological parents of adoptees. A similar divide can be detected in cinematic works on the topic. Autobiographical films produced by adopted Koreans have tended to remain in indie circles, whereas commercial and well-known art-house works that incorporate the theme of international adoption into narratives have tended to lighten and depoliticize the topic with generic formulas.<sup>6</sup>

Significantly, the films created by either adoptees or Korean Americans have tended to be in a foreign (non-Korean) language and to depict Korea from an outsider's point of view, no doubt making it difficult for the average Korean audience to digest these works. Against such a background, *A Brand New Life* and *Treeless Mountain* become all the more significant in overcoming these obstacles. The Korean scripts (along with the Korean settings) clearly made the films more accessible to the domestic audience while assistance from the Asian Project Market and coproduction with Korean companies allowed the films to be easily distributed and marketed in Korea as well as abroad. At the center of this Korean "wrapping" is the focus on childhood memories, rather than an adult's search for identity. The films were able to camouflage the troubling social issues of the narratives and take on a fully "Korean" perspective. Not only do the childhood settings justify the use of a Korean script and setting, but the narratives also depict a time when the author surrogates were "fully" Korean in their identity. In this sense, *A Brand New Life* and *Treeless Mountain* become rare and significant examples of cinematic works that have received domestic distribution and

critical attention, despite being made by those who may not consider themselves (or be considered by Koreans) as “fully” Korean.

## CONCLUSION

This article has examined two independent films from 2009—*A Brand New Life* and *Treeless Mountain*—that explore the subject of abandoned children. The analysis has been twofold. The first, textual analysis explored the films’ analogous narrative trajectories and their shared focus on child perspectives. Such child perspectives, and the consequent corresponding cinematography, have been shown to be crucial in dampening the controversial issues and sentimentality of the narratives. The second layer of analysis explored the “accented context” of these films, borrowing from Hamid Naficy’s theory of accented cinema. This section investigated the similar backgrounds of the two filmmakers as Westerners with Korean roots, comparing not only the autobiographical aspects of the works but also their similar accented styles and production histories.

Through these two layers of analysis, I argue that the inclusion of these two films in Korean film history is doubly crucial. On a diegetic level, they offer an interesting and rare insight into certain childhood experiences of Korean life that are rarely discussed or depicted in mainstream Korean culture and almost forgotten by Korean society and history. On a production level, the films also draw attention to a wider community of filmmakers who have Korean identities or personal roots and are living outside Korea. Although these works, like their filmmakers, cannot—and in a sense, should not—be neatly categorized into one national identity, I stress the importance of acknowledging at least some such works under the umbrella of Korean cinema. *A Brand New Life* and *Treeless Mountain* are key cases of diasporic filmmaking that have successfully pervaded the strong national border surrounding Korean cinema. Their chosen focus on childhood has played a pivotal role in this feat by allowing the films to appear as “fully” Korean, not only justifying the Korean script and setting but also concealing the diasporic backgrounds of the filmmakers. And yet, one wonders if the existence of such films also attests to the need to destabilize the national boundary of Korean cinema. Perhaps the Korean “wrapping” that Lecomte and Kim

use in these films will no longer be necessary when accented films, no longer marginalized, become more visibly accepted as a category of their own.

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## NOTES

1. Though peripheral, children have not been entirely absent from mainstream films. Child characters have featured in blockbuster hits such as Bong Joon-ho's *The Host* (*Koemul*, 2006), Yi Chöng-böm's *The Man from Nowhere* (*Ajössi*, 2010), and Hwang Tong-hyök's *Silenced* (*Togani*, 2011), whose plots have involved rescuing a threatened child. Although the children's roles in these films are important to the narratives, the focus on and actual role of the children has generally been minor.
2. I use the word "return" here because suffering/abandoned children were a fairly common historical topic in Korean cinema. Even before the Golden Age of the 1950s and 1960s, several prominent films featured child characters, including Choi In-gyu's recently recovered *Tuition Fee* (*Suömröyö*, 1940) and his *Angels on the Streets* (*Chibömnün ch'önsa*, 1941), along with Yun Yong-kyu's *A Hometown in My Heart* (*Maümüi kohyang*, 1949). Arguably the most famous portrayals of suffering child characters, however, are found in the 1960s and 1970s. Kim Su-yong's *Sorrow Even in Heaven* (*Chö hanüledo sülp'ümi*, 1965) and Lee Won-se's *World without Mom* (*Ömma ömnün hanül arae*, 1977) are powerfully sentimental films that depict both the emotional and physical hardships of children abandoned by their families for circumstantial reasons.
3. The Asian Project Market was launched in 1998 to further BIFF's overall goal of supporting Asian cinema. It invited filmmakers to participate in panels and roundtable discussions and to pitch presentation events to encourage joint investments and co-productions. For more on the Busan Film Festival and the Asian Project Market, see Ahn (2011).
4. Viewers familiar with Korean cinema will be surprised to see that the father is played by Sol Kyung-gu, an actor well known to viewers of Korean cinema for his role in Lee Chang-dong's *Peppermint Candy* (*Pakha sa'ang*, 2000).
5. In the question-and-answer session at Film Forum, New York, Kim mentioned that when she met Kore-eda at Cannes she attempted to find out how

he dealt with child actors, but the language barrier proved too difficult (S. Y. Kim 2010).

6. These include Park Kwang-su's *Berlin Report* (*Perüllin rip'ot'ü*, 1991), Kim Kiduk's *Wild Animals* (*Yasaeng t'ongmul poboguyök*, 1996), Kim Söng-su's *Please Teach Me English* (*Yöngö wanjön chöngbok*, 2003), Hwang Tong-hyök's *My Father* (*Mai p'adö*, 2007), and Kim Yong-hwa's *Take Off* (*Kukkataep'yo*, 2009). The most significant commercial film depicting overseas adoption is arguably Jang Gil-su's *Susanne Brink's Arirang* (*Sujan büringk'ü-üi arirang*, 1991), one of the earliest popular cultural works to look at the issue.

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