

Wedding citizenship and culture: Korean adoptees and the global family of Korea.

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## Wedding Citizenship and Culture: Korean Adoptees and the Global Family of Korea

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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Wedding Citizenship And Culture

Korean Adoptees and the Global Family of Korea

On a hot August afternoon in a bucolic setting on the outskirts of Kwangju, South Korea, a palanquin was hoisted up and brought to the site of a canopy tent, under which a table, laden with food, alcohol, and two live chickens, rested. An elderly Korean man intoned directions into a microphone and an interpreter called out the translation in English. Around fifty Koreans, the women dressed in Korean *hanbok*, surrounded the tent, and all eyes were on the heavily made up bride as she was helped out of the palanquin, her face turned down into her hands, elbows raised to either side of her head. She and the bridegroom knelt on opposite sides of the table, rising awkwardly to kowtow several times, pouring and ceremoniously sipping alcohol from carved out gourds—and thus endured the elaborate ritual of a traditional Korean wedding ceremony.

In this pastoral location, the authenticity of the ritual performance was made conspicuous by tennis shoes and sports sandals peeking out from beneath the *hanbok* (which were poorly fitted—some too large and some too small for their wearers) and by men in tank tops and shorts looking on from a distance. As the spectators stood on tiptoe and craned their necks to observe the careful gestures of the bride and groom, their gazes were frequently interrupted by the aggressive movements of television camera crews. Some onlookers were elbowed out of the way by camerapeople getting into position, another was hit in the head more than once by a camera being wielded on a cameraperson's shoulder.

This was not, by any means, a typical Korean wedding—in fact, it was not even a legitimate union between a man and a woman.<sup>1</sup> The presence of the cameras and their intrusiveness on the experience of those watching suggested that the real intended audience was elsewhere, on the other side of the lens. The audience here was being captured as part of the same spectacle—for ultimate consumption by the Korean public.

In fact, the "wedding" was staged for a group of overseas Korean adoptees, invited and hosted by the South Korean government under the auspices of the Overseas Koreans Foundation (OKF), a division of South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The roles of bride and groom were played by Korean adoptees, and the onlookers were, for the most part, other adoptees or, like myself, camp counselors.<sup>2</sup> It was the seventh day of a ten-day program in which thirty adoptees, ranging in age [End Page 57] from sixteen to thirty-four and hailing from North America, Europe, and Australia, participated. On this day, perhaps aggravated by the heat, frustrations had mounted, and the presence of the media only made things worse. Later, some complained to me that they felt like "animals in a zoo," made a spectacle of as they were transported from location to location on what one adoptee called "the orphan bus," emblazoned with a banner that read "2001 Summer Cultural Awareness Training Program for Overseas Adopted Koreans" [*kukoe ibyang tongp'o moguk munhwa yeonsu*] in Korean and English.

I begin this article with a story from the 2001 OKF summer program to suggest how the attempts and gestures of the South Korean state to grant "Koreanness" to overseas Korean adoptees come into conflict with the desires and experiences of adopted Koreans themselves.<sup>3</sup> The OKF program was in many ways an attempt to wed Korean adoptees to "Korea,"<sup>4</sup> an invitation to the "motherland" so that they might, as offered by the president of OKF, "begin to feel the breath of Korea's rich culture." The OKF program was cohosted by Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (GOAL), a four-year-old adoptee-established organization that in January 2002 received NGO status from the South Korean government, and by Bridge of Adoptees from Chonnam Kwangju (BACK), an independent volunteer Korean organization headed by a local businessperson. It...

Eleana Kim

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