In 1999, I returned to South Korea, my birth country, for the first time since my adoption by a French family at age four. I was then twenty-one and a participant in the Holt International Summer School, a three-week program for international adoptees held every summer since 1991 by the adoption agency Holt Children’s Services. That summer, I discovered a television show called *Ach’im madang: kŭ sarami pogosip’ta* (Morning talk show: I want to see this person again). At the beginning of my visit, Korean social workers played a recorded tape of *Ach’im madang* in the living room of the Holt guesthouse, where the group stayed. One scene in particular struck me: rebroadcast in slow motion, a Korean mother was shown bursting into tears and rushing toward her twenty-year-old son, who had been adopted in the United States. The palpable tension of the moment was heightened by a tragic melody played in the background, a song redolent of South Korean televised melodrama. That day, in the guesthouse, several adoptees in the audience started weeping at this scene, having succumbed to unknown or unspeakable emotions. After a few days, the social workers, having carried out searches based on each adoptee’s adoption file, announced that some of us would be able to meet our birth families: mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters, aunts, grandparents. Thanks to the videotape, participants knew how the first encounter would unfold. Social workers had clearly used the television program as a pedagogical tool to prepare us for our potential meetings with our birth families.

In the history of transnational adoption, the case of South Korea is remarkable for many reasons. The Korean War (1950–1953) marked a change in the care of children from temporary fostering of young war orphans and refugees to definite adoptions into new, foreign families (Marre and Briggs 2009, 8). Since then South Korea has sent abroad approximately 200,000 children who now live mainly in the United States and Europe. It was the number one sending country from 1980 to 1989, number two in 1995, and still number four from 1998 to 2004 (Gutton 1993; Dorow 2006; Selman 2009). But rather than the number of children...
sent abroad, the most intriguing aspect of the phenomenon is perhaps the sheer scale of the mobilization that has taken place within Korea around the return of adult adoptees to their birth country since the 1990s, and by extension the national significance that has been accorded to meetings between transnational adoptees and their Korean birth parents. As we will see, research shows that the severance of adoptees’ ties with their birth country is symbolically repaired in South Korea when birth parents reappear in public with the children they gave up for adoption. But these meetings create a type of relatedness that does not necessarily lead to sustained relationships. If the initial meetings do result in relationships, they do so due to favorable sociological conditions but also to personal choices. And both these sociological conditions and personal choices are subject to changes during the parties’ lifetimes. The public meetings between adult adoptees and their birth parents in South Korea thus constitute a fascinating case for those interested in new kinship and contemporary families whose shape depends less on natural reproduction, old customs, and individuals’ reliance on an unquestioned life cycle than on politics, technologies, and individuals’ strategies. This book explores the representations of transnational adoptees in South Korea by examining official discourses and media as well as everyday interactions between adoptees and South Korean citizens, birth parents and otherwise. Informed by my own experience as an adult adoptee and by two years of ethnographic research in Seoul, this book analyzes the social facts of adoptee reintegration through the lenses of South Korean individuals, families, society, and nation. I contend that South Korean society actually organizes returns and meetings to make departures and ruptures acceptable, as negotiable and conscious choices and no longer as forced or ineluctable events. As we will see, my research suggests that family meetings are a social service organized by the state on behalf of both parents and children.

* * *

The following are two additional vignettes that, in conjunction with the earlier anecdote, relate in chronological order my encounters with the adoptee–birth parent meetings phenomenon in South Korea. These vignettes work together to set the stage for this book’s successive chapters that depict the political conditions, social parameters, pragmatic limitations, and multilayered meaning of adoptee reintegration to their birth country and birth families.
Meeting with My Birth Family (July 17, 1999)

We adoptees watched the video of Ach’im madang on a Tuesday. By Saturday, we were halfway through the Holt International Summer School program. Most participants were by now displaying unusual signs of anxiety. One of them reminded me that it was “D-day,” indicated on the schedule by the innocuous phrase “opening files.” All of us were about to find out if the social workers had tracked down our biological parents, or had at least located some of our Korean relatives who were still alive. Since the beginning of our stay they had been involved in conducting searches for our family members while others were guiding us through different activities and observing us to anticipate any negative reactions in the case of disappointment or surprise.

When my turn came, I went up to the room of Mrs. Na, the oldest social worker. When I entered the room, she smiled and addressed me in English:

“You’re a very lucky girl!”

“Really, why is that?”

“Please sit down. There was a phone number in your files, and we were able to reach your paternal grandmother. Your father passed away in 1993, as did one of your paternal uncles in 1998. But you have another paternal uncle who has been calling every day to see when the family can meet with you. . . . We also contacted your mother, who wants to see you and take you home after your stay with us. She lives alone. You are staying in Korea for a while longer after the program . . . two months, right? We thought that you might want to meet them right after your stay here.”

“Well, I am sorry but I have plans . . . I have to go to Japan to meet some friends.”

Her face crumpled in indignation. “How can you react this way? Your mother hasn’t seen you in seventeen years and you don’t want to see her?”

“That’s not what I meant at all,” I replied. “If they really want to see me, of course I’ll meet with them, but I also have some plans to travel.”

After scolding me, the social worker asked if I had a Korean friend who could serve as an interpreter during my family reunion. Another week went by, and shortly after the closing ceremony held at Holt Children’s Services, I was called to Mrs. Na’s office once again. A Korean friend who spoke French accompanied me.

In the office, we waited together for my mother and my paternal aunt, who, as Mrs. Na explained, used to be friends at school. Suddenly, she received a phone call and left the room. A few minutes later, the door opened, and two Korean women in their fifties appeared with Mrs. Na. One woman’s eyes
were red from crying; the other woman smiled shyly, supporting her companion. They looked inquiringly at my friend, then at me. Mrs. Na laughed, identifying me as their daughter and niece. They hugged me awkwardly for a moment, and then everybody sat down on the couches to have a discussion. The woman who was crying was my mother. Mrs. Na related her impressions of me, based on the three weeks we had spent together. Although I was perplexed, I tried to encourage the two women with a smile.

My Korean friend started translating into French for me as we began our conversation. I was asked about my sister, with whom I had been adopted by the French family. They reproached me for not having brought any pictures, but I restrained myself from saying that I had not really planned on meeting with them. They asked me how long I would stay in Korea. My hands were held and massaged; my features were studied, and I was compared to my father. My paternal aunt had brought photographs: one of them featured me as a baby next to an older baby who was my cousin—my paternal aunt’s son. I would meet him as soon as he got permission to leave the army. He was in the middle of his military tour of duty in the region of Kangwon. There was also a picture of my father in his twenties, at my paternal aunt’s wedding, in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary. I was surprised to learn that they were all Catholic, like my adoptive family. My mother had left my father and never remarried. She was living with her mother, her younger sister, her sister’s husband, and their three children. She worked at an insurance company. At that time, I had difficulty remembering how many aunts and uncles I had just acquired and who was living or deceased.

After these preliminaries, we all went to a neighborhood restaurant. At that moment, I received a phone call from an elderly nun from an Inchon orphanage I had contacted at the beginning of my stay. I had called on behalf of my French family, who had been in touch with her since my adoption, but also in the hope that I could visit the orphanage where I had once stayed. The nun arrived soon afterward, speaking perfect French and English. After we all introduced each other, she started asking my mother questions and translating for me. Thus I came to learn more about the circumstances of our separation. My mother had met my father through my paternal aunt. They had married against the advice of their parents when he was twenty-four and she twenty-seven. Shortly after I was born, they started talking about divorce, but my paternal grandfather was firmly opposed to it. My sister was born two years later. Shortly upon discovering that my father had a mistress, my mother fled to her maternal home. It was not until my paternal grandfather passed away that the divorce was officially pronounced. My mother answered the nun’s questions as she ate her meal and kept repeating that she
felt guilty for leaving us. We then changed topics: my mother asked what I was doing now. I explained that I had studied philosophy and had recently switched to anthropology. My mother grumbled, “What is she gonna do with that?” Everybody laughed but me.

After this first meeting, we decided on a time when my mother would come to pick me up for a home visit. My newfound relatives decided whom I would visit and in which order. I was ignorant of how many relatives I had begotten, what they were doing, and how to address them. I was vaguely worried by this turn of events and started having the unpleasant feeling of losing all control of the situation. I begged my Korean friend to come see us often to help translate our conversations. She told me not to worry; she and a friend of hers would take turns translating every other day so that I would be able to communicate with my Korean relatives at dinners. She took down all the necessary phone numbers.

A few days later, when the summer school program was over, my mother and my paternal aunt came together to pick me up at the Holt Center in Ilsan. I said good-bye to the few remaining participants, then got into my mother’s car, taking a seat in the back. My paternal aunt, in the front seat, looked back at me every now and then with a smile. Sometimes my mother peered nervously into the rearview mirror from behind her big sunglasses, but she did not smile. They were mumbling something to each other. The trip from Ilsan to Inchon seemed endless, and I fell asleep several times.

I ended up spending the rest of the summer with my relatives, though I did manage to visit my friend in Japan as well. Back in France, it took me months to decide that I would switch the focus of my graduate studies from Russia to South Korea. My paternal aunt and her son kept sending me short letters in Korean that I read with my beginner’s dictionary and with the help of my interpreter friend, who had come back to Paris. Eventually, I returned to South Korea to learn Korean and get to know them better.

Observing Family Meetings at the Korean Broadcasting System Studio (June 4, 2003)

What takes place on the television show Ach’im madang are first meetings between South Koreans and their long-lost relatives, but in contrast to my own meeting with my birth family, these reunions are well orchestrated and well performed.

On June 4, 2003, at 8:36 in the morning, a flashback reminded Ach’im madang viewers of the last broadcast. After her initial presentation on that show, while she sat listening to the next guest, one female participant had
received a phone call. Now, the participant was standing at the lectern, wearing a formal outfit. To her right were the show's host and hostess, Lee Sang-byŏk and Lee Kŭm-hŭi, who were retelling her story for a few minutes during which the participant showed signs of impatience.

“Well, now, please step forward. Are you going to call 'mom' [ŏnma] or 'mother' [ŏmŏni] or 'older sister' [ŏnni]? Say what is easier for you.”

The participant stepped to the middle of the stage and turned toward the corridor from which the relatives were about to appear. The hostess indicated the entrance with a theatrical gesture. After rocking back and forth nervously, the participant dried her tears and called in a strangled voice, “Mom!”

Applause from the audience and melodramatic music greeted the relatives as they entered onto the stage at 8:38. Round green tags fixed at their collars indicated each person's relation to the participant: “mother,” “older sister,” “paternal grandaunt,” “little brother.” While they hugged each other, information was displayed on the screen for the viewers: “Meeting after twenty-nine years of separation.” The camera zoomed in on the mother's and daughter's faces. Both of them were murmuring, forehead against forehead. The clip-on microphones they were wearing allowed the audience and the viewers to hear the exchange, but the participant could only sob, “Mom, mom, I missed you so much!” In the background, one of the brothers, obviously embarrassed by this awkward situation, kept his head down, compulsively wiping his eyes that seemed to remain dry.

The melodramatic music lasted only one minute; when it was over, the hosts left the lectern and went to meet the reunited family in the middle of the stage. They tried to separate the family members in order to ask questions and reintroduce them to the audience. In the softest tone of voice, the host said, “The little brothers and the older sister of the participant could call their mother whenever they wanted because she was always by their side, but this was not the case for her.” As sobbing sounds continued, he went on: “Ah! You brought some pictures. How old are they in this picture?” The sobs continued, but there was no answer. The hostess seized an old black-and-white picture of the two sisters holding hands. She presented it to the camera. The two girls had the same bobbed hair and the same bangs, which inspired the hostess to comment in a tender voice, “Ayuuu! Ayuuuu! Their bangs are exactly the same!”

The participant was still crying. The hosts turned toward the mother: “She who was so little when you saw her last, here she is again before your eyes!” The mother grumbled without expression, “As I did not know where she was, I could not find her. . . . Thanks to her paternal aunt who watched Ach’im madang, we were able to find her again.” The microphone was then offered to
the paternal grandaunt who was the cause of the reunion. “I watched Ach’im madang every day! Every day!”

The participant kept talking to one of her brothers, the one rubbing his eyes. She held his head against her head. The camera followed their interaction: “I was the one who used to carry you on my back . . . ” “I did not know,” he answered, visibly embarrassed. He kept his head down, avoiding her looks by holding his hand above his eyes the whole time.

The camera still followed their interaction and rambling conversation, but it was already time to introduce the participant’s husband and two sons. The hostess announced: “Your daughter married early, and she already has a son who is twelve years old. Grandsons, son-in-law, please come forward.”

The three people approached from offstage. When they reached the middle of the stage, close to the flowers on the pedestal table, they performed a deep bow to their newly found relatives. The hostess told the children, “Here is your grandmother, here are your maternal uncles.” The participant’s husband shook hands with his wife’s brothers and gave them each a friendly pat on the back. The camera focused on one of the two boys as the host tried to ask him about his feelings, but because they were intimidated, the two boys did not speak much. It was time to conclude the episode.

The hostess repeated her final instruction to the audience several times, “Please congratulate them! Please congratulate them! Please applaud them!” The audience carried out the order. Suddenly the host asked the reunited family to stand in a line. He gave the signal as if they were pupils: “Ayyyy . . . ! This turned out so well! Attention! Ready! Bow!” All the people present onstage, including the hosts, bowed together while holding hands, like actors finishing a performance on the stage. The newly reunited family finally exited. The paternal grandaunt tried to greet the hosts again, but they were already looking at their notes to handle the family to be featured next.

Position and Method

The preceding vignettes describe three kinds of family meetings I witnessed in very different modes: as a viewer, as an actor, and as a scholarly observer. They recount, in chronological order, three moments that correspond to three different stages of my status and my position within the family meeting phenomenon. I watched the first meeting on a television screen in a room full of other adoptees from the United States and Europe, but also with the South Korean organizers of the summer school. At the time, I was not aware of the reasons we had to watch that video and what was about to happen, partly because of my poor command of English but also because of my carefree
attitude. I then experienced something similar as one of the main actors of a three-party event involving my birth relatives and the South Korean social worker in whose office our meeting took place. Finally, I observed other meetings of adult adoptees and their Korean families as an anthropologist, sitting in a studio audience with the participants of the television program, but also with an eye on the actions going on backstage during the production, on the various preparations that took place before the taping, and on the larger sociohistorical context of these meetings and their aftermaths. These three different moments owe to my position within the phenomenon of adoptee reintegration in South Korea.

When I first returned to South Korea, I was immediately defined by South Koreans as part of a group called the “transnational adoptees.” As such, I had to learn about Korean society and about the possibility of meeting with my birth parents, and I had to prepare myself for such an event. As soon as I met with my birth family, I became a “living oxymoron” (Kondo 1990), a relative and at the same time a stranger, and I realized that my birth family and I had experienced our first encounter in very different ways: my Korean relatives had presented a united attitude of knowing sadness as they spoke to and about me, whereas I was far more perplexed by our interaction and was simply smiling at them. They were meeting somebody they thought they knew, someone to whom their relationship was already defined, whereas I was meeting strangers for the first time. At least, such was my reasoning as a French adoptee who was raised in an environment where blood and race supposedly did not matter. They were a South Korean mother and aunt, each in her fifties and somewhat familiar with the televised meeting programs and the general context of family separation, whereas I was a twenty-one-year-old French student who had simply come to South Korea to travel around Asia and have a bit of fun. That I did not cry at the first meeting with my mother and aunt left my family rather stunned. That I suddenly wept alone in the middle of a meal at a maternal uncle’s house a few days later surprised them as well—I had just started to grasp what was happening to me. From these initial moments of discordant expectations arose in my own mind several questions about the nature of such reunions: What were the political, institutional, and historical conditions that even made such meetings possible? From then on I also found myself more interested in Ach’im madang, the most popular South Korean “meeting program,” for I had the intuition that my emotional ineptitude would find an explanation in its study. As I witnessed other, more orchestrated meetings in the KBS studio, inevitably comparing them with my own, I came to see that the form of the meeting was perhaps more important than its content. Moreover, the study of the
program’s history would tell me about the evolution of adoptees’ representations while providing information concerning a larger picture, perhaps explaining why, for example, transnational adoptees, domestic adoptees, and Korean orphans could appear side by side on the same television show.

In addition, I thought I would find clues as to where I stood within, what to do with, and what to expect from my own birth family after the first meeting. If I knew what they wanted and what they thought, I would know how to adjust to the new situation and act properly. My main questions were: What do these meetings do? Do they change the nature of transnational adoption? What kind of ties do they create? Does the future of these ties depend on each family’s idiosyncrasies and each individual’s psychological state? I already had the feeling it was not so: what my relatives wanted and what they thought were not mere matters of psychology or temperament. Rather, these matters had to do with kinship and culture. Therefore, as a social anthropologist, I would approach my relatives as part of Korean society, as the “others.” This somewhat deterministic view of culture and kinship was encouraged by my readings on Korea but, later on, was challenged by direct experience and time. In fact, far from sticking to kinship patterns I once read about, my relatives’ attitudes and my own still oscillate between pragmatic adaptations that depend on variable personal and familial circumstances, and assigned roles or duties valued as ideals within Korean families.

I had chosen to concentrate in social anthropology prior to my return to Korea, after which my personal story had indeed oriented my interests. This double position required a specific approach that, until recently, filled me with ambiguous if not contradictory feelings that complicated the exchanges I had with Koreans and adoptees alike. In this book transnational adoptees who return to South Korea are only the protagonists of actions generated and organized by Koreans, not informants whose opinion is solicited. That said, I do not mean that adoptees lack agency in these encounters. While my focus is on Koreans, I do report some adoptees’ reactions and words on certain occasions, illustrating that they do react and speak out. Because of my double position, I made the conscious decision to rely more on observation than on interviews. Given my phenotype, observation allowed me to witness fleeting interactions, dialogues, and attitudes without Korean people’s knowledge that I was an adoptee. Short conversations also let me pass for a Korean resident abroad, which always lightened my interlocutors’ mood. To the contrary, in interviews my identity as an adoptee always occupied the foreground, most often leading either to dead ends with persons directly concerned with adoption, such as birth parents (except for today’s young single mothers, as we will see), or to repetitive and sometimes off-topic debates.
on the ever-controversial and ever-sensitive topic of adoption and transnational adoption. I primarily restricted my interviews to people engaged in the adoption process or working as professionals in the production of the televised meeting program. I have included some descriptions of the biographical elements from my own life that chronicle my long-term relationship with my biological family to provide a qualitative understanding of rather private life experiences. Again, that type of material relied more on participant observation of everyday life and spontaneous interaction than on organized and systematic interviews with my relatives.

I stage myself in a larger narrative as being acted upon by South Korean society and as being a valuable witness and informant to my own anthropological analysis. The reader will find every now and then auto-ethnographic elements that contribute to the understanding of ethnographic situations I experienced and of the intersubjective evolution of my relationship with my birth family. Yet, this book aims to be neither an adoptee memoir focusing on my interiority or my innermost feelings about being an adoptee, nor a pure reflection on anthropological fieldwork featuring myself as the main character, nor a pamphlet against transnational adoption, nor a manifesto claiming the emergence of a Korean adoptee community. I present case studies in a historical and anthropological frame. My core goal is to offer an alternative to what has already been written on transnational adoption from Korea, and to contribute to new kinship studies and to growing research that examines the impact of transnational adoption on the evolution and representations of family, as well as the human implications of modernity and globalization in Korea and more broadly in Northeast Asia.

To a great extent, it is hard to separate the issues related to transnational adoption in South Korea from its treatment by the media since the late 1980s. Therefore, on top of participant observation and interviews, this work examines the television programs, films, newspapers, and websites that broadcast factual information and “expressive representations” (Appadurai 1996) about transnational adoption. Because of their omnipresence in contemporary South Korea, these sources of media constitute “a significant domain of social life” (Janelli and Yim 2005). Given the diversity of media productions, there are a variety of analytical approaches one may take toward them. On the one hand, my method partly consisted of selecting different types of fictions with related topics such as domestic or transnational adoption and the lives and destinies of orphans, and analyzing them in order to extract structural regularities. I approached these narratives more or less as texts that reflect, through invented lives and events involving fictional characters, some norms and questions relevant to South
Korean society at the time the works were produced (Chalvon-Demersay 2005, 82; Abelmann 2003). On the other hand, I researched and analyzed the reality show *Ach'im madang*. But the textual approach for a reality show had obvious limitations. Previous studies in the anthropology of media have revealed, beyond the meanings within the narratives themselves (fictional or not), the context and the reasons of their creation, focusing on the influence of politics on the production of national cinema and television (Abu-Lughod 1993, 1995, 2000). Studies of television not only can identify political stakes and describe the diversity of national productions but also can focus on their reception by the public and on their material consequences in everyday life (Mankekar 1999). Combining these different approaches, this book describes the production of the South Korean weekly meeting program *Ach'im madang*, exposes its relation to the state, and explores its reception by the public. Because we are dealing here with real people, I am especially interested in the way this meeting program not only speaks of but also may reconfigure family, kinship, and adoption. Therefore, this book is meant to contribute to the anthropology of kinship with a focus on adoption while exploring and articulating several subfields such as the anthropology of media and emotion.

Television and Kinship

Although considered a reality show that uses real participants and true stories, *Ach'im madang* can be considered a certain kind of fiction, one not too far from literary fiction. It produces a more or less formatted narrative that encompasses all kinds of family separation by framing them in a larger national history of war and division. By doing so, it conflates state and family—and serves both. *Ach'im madang* may transmit familial and national values and tradition to viewers, but individuals also use the program for their own purposes, however complex those may be. Therefore, the show cannot be reduced merely to a narrative one should interpret, any more than it can be reduced solely to its political aspect (Ricoeur 1986, 1992). It is ironic that the program’s strong emphasis on “real kinship” based on blood necessitates the elaborate construction of a near-fictional narrative that leaves little space for spontaneous attitudes or discourses, and proves to be weak in the face of everyday life’s obligations and societal pressures in the meetings’ aftermaths.

In the second part of this book, a glimpse of these aftermaths will confirm the hypothesis that, in this context, blood is no thicker than water. Here, biological kinship can be experienced either at a symbolic level or, in the long run, through sustained and concerted effort.
Kinship and Emotions

The general narrative produced and reproduced at *Ach’im madang* also enables catharsis for traumatic separations as well as certain patterns of familial construction through the production of proper emotions. The social workers’ use of the program video indicated the need to inculcate the right emotions in order to facilitate interactions—not only between foreigners and Koreans but also between children and parents. The ritualized actions undertaken during the spectacle that constitutes the meeting program call for a performative approach (Hughes-Freeland and Markwell Crain 1998; Schechner 1977, 1993; Schechner and Appel 1990). I focus on the making of the show and on the spreading of that particular narrative. Transnational adoptees, as members of a liminal social category, are assigned all kinds of ritualized actions, among which is meeting with their birth families when searches are successful. Even if considered as a political narrative on family separation in the context of national partition, the program *Ach’im madang* seems to soothe familial issues, to work on feelings of loss and resentment, and, in some cases, to build a type of relatedness that has been only recently touched upon and needs further exploration.

The ethnography of televised first meetings between adoptees and birth families provides an entry into the exploration of new types of families that combine biological kinship and chosen relatedness. Far from merely reconstituting the broken ties between individuals related by blood, these collective, carefully orchestrated meetings remind us that blood, while always remaining a liability in the mind of most people (in Korea and in the Western adoptive countries), does not suffice to (re-)create families. The discrepancy mentioned earlier between ideal kinship and pragmatic kinship is mirrored by the meeting’s two sequences: the onstage, ritualized, public sequence versus the offstage, freer, private sequence. It would be erroneous, however, to see these two sequences as completely opposed—the “fake” or fictional sequence as opposed to the “real” and true sequence. Together, both sequences form a social reality that individuals who are caught in familial situations deemed unusual need to negotiate at an emotional and symbolic level.

Adoption, Meetings and Postmeetings

Adoption, the creation of filiation among individuals who do not share a blood connection, is quasi-universal but varies from place to place. Adoption always involves three parties: the adoptee, the adoptive parent(s), and the biological parent(s). The three parties’ relations are stipulated by
tradition or a judicial system. Adoption inside a group or inside one's culture has been the topic of numerous works in anthropology, which usually take into account the three components of the adoption triad (Le Gall and Bet-tahar 2001; Camdessus 1995).

According to Western norms, adoption establishes definite and official filiation, as opposed to other forms of temporary or informal caring. In this context, adoption is considered a fiction that copies "real" filiation that comes from sexual procreation and is based on blood (Carsten 2004; Schneider 1984). This arrangement frequently results in uneasy feelings for those who experience this type of unusual kinship (Modell 1994, 3–4). Thus, adoption studies in Western countries often focus on the psychology of people involved in adoption, and especially on the adoptee's mental issues (Lévine 1996). They also compare and discuss the advantages and drawbacks of the different systems of adoption—open, plenary or closed, simple, "sous X" (born to unknown mother), and so forth—and describe the evolution of adoption laws and practices (Fine and Neirinck 2000; Ouellette 2009). In so-called traditional societies, anthropologists study adoption as only one modality of child circulation among a multitude of other practices (Lallemand 1993; Bowie 2004). In adoption, the child can often be seen as a gift that groups exchange the way they exchange women. In this case, adoption builds an alliance between adoptive and birth parents (Lévi-Strauss 1985; Jack Goody, 1969). This is not the case in Korea, where, until recently, adoption was almost exclusively a means to find an heir and prolong the Confucian patriline (Peterson 1996). But there are many other forms of adoption worldwide that sometimes give the choice to the adoptee, sometimes disturb generational order when a grandmother becomes a mother (Bowie 2004), and sometimes entail more or less contact—and no alliance per se—between the donor and receiver, as in Western open adoption cases nowadays.

Transnational adoption is yet another kind of adoption that has as many facets as there are countries involved. It obviously places limits upon the possible alliance between donors and receivers or the openness of adoption. This book, however, shows how Korean society, beginning in the 1990s, has developed a focus on reunions that supposedly "reopen" adoptions after several decades. Is the strong Korean emphasis on blood enough to reconstitute wholesome families? Do the outcomes of these televised meetings between adoptees raised in Western countries and their Korean birth parents substantially differ from the meetings described in the context of domestic adoption in Western countries?

Transnational adoption started on a significant scale in the second half of the twentieth century and developed considerably during the 1980s and 1990s.
(Selman 2009). Early on, in Western countries, studies on transnational and transracial adoptions were contained primarily within the fields of psychology and social work (Frances Koh 1981). Later, they also motivated research on adoption laws in the countries that provide children, and research on international laws (Marre and Briggs 2009). After 2000, adoption studies became a subfield of research across various disciplines. Research on transnational adoption often focused on how adoptive parents negotiate race and culture regarding the incorporation of adopted children in their family. It also looked at the construction of the adoptees as objects of desire, exchange, and consumption through the erasure of their past and previous relationships (Eleana Kim 2010, 10–11). But for a long time physical and cultural distance were indeed obstacles to examining the entire triad of transnational adoption. In the academic world, voices of birth parents and of adoptees themselves were missing, and their representations of transnational adoption unknown. Recently, the field has seen the emergence of important research on the birth parents’ societies (Johnson, Huang, and Wang 1998; Johnson, 2004; Jung-woo Kim and Henderson 2008; Joo-lee Lee, 2007) and adoptees’ communities (Eleana Kim 2007), with more and more adoptees entering the various academic fields to write about adoption. Even more recently, studies on adoption have started looking at the different ways in which transnational adoptees and their adoptive families engage with birth countries and birth families. These studies revolve around three types of discourses concerning transnational adoptees’ returns to the land of their birth, family searches, and meetings with their birth families. Widely accepted by adoptive families and other types of nontraditional families in the United States and parts of Europe, the first discourse claims that returning to one’s birthplace to look for one’s origins, roots, or genetic heritage is good and healthy (Dorow 2006). This position has the backup of media and DNA technologies and feeds on a global consciousness (Volkman 2009). The second discourse, expressed by unconditional partisans of nurture against culture, sees the adoptees’ search for birth parents as a threat for adoptive families who are supposed to embody the principle that blood does not matter. Searches and returns are depicted as confusing experiences (Howell 2009). In between these two positions, the third one is yet uncertain as to the benefits of finding one’s birth parents and points at the difficulties that may arise in the wake of this discovery while, at the same time, stating that the will to know is legitimate. Anthropologist Barbara Yngvesson (2002), for example, has collected the testimonies of many young adult adoptees from Sweden who have returned to their various birth countries and who keep in touch with their birth parents. Through these stories, the reader gets only indirect glimpses
at these ties and at the birth parents’ lives and experiences because the focus is on the adoptees’ subjectivities. These adoptees voice doubts regarding the future of their relationships to their birth parents, but most care about them very much and are ready to invest time and resources in these ties. My work on the meetings and postmeeting relationships between adoptees and their Korean birth parents is an attempt to explore further this new type of kinship located in between spaces and in between biological and social kinships. A common problem is that in most cases, transnational adoption is constructed by the law as a replacement of blood ties, so when the figure of the birth parent reappears, it disrupts the myth of adoption and seems to threaten identities. Now, social anthropologists have recognized new types of relatedness that challenge that dichotomy: the potential ties between sperm or egg donors, or surrogate mothers with the families they helped create; or between adoptees and their birth parents. By calling these ties biogenetic, one implies a pseudoscientific distance, a relatedness based on some kind of knowledge on paper that responds to curiosity or pragmatism. This seriously limits the understanding of the emotional and social repercussions of these types of relatedness in people’s lives (Strathern 1992; Carsten 2004). Meetings between adoptees and their birth parents within domestic adoption have been the most thoroughly described as being beneficial (Carsten 2004, 104) and as leading to new paths within contemporary kinship where people have to venture “without maps” (Modell 1994). But it is clear that returns that lead to meetings between birth parents and children after transnational adoptions present a case substantially different from the preceding examples because many birth parents actually spent time with their children before their separation, and because their views on parent-child relationship may differ from those of their children: an ideal kinship “map” in their minds may inform their attitudes and decisions regarding these ties. Adoptees may have their own “maps” as well. Yet once the meeting has occurred, the relatedness it creates may change quality through time according to multiple parameters, despite the fact that it is based on blood.

In line with the third position regarding family search, meetings, and postmeetings, I argue that no matter their outcome, the meetings are beneficial for both adoptees and birth parents despite their different cultures and experiences, so long as one does not mistake the meetings for a reconstitution of biological families and what they usually imply in economic, legal, and emotional terms. Instead, I show that the meetings in South Korea are a process of recognition of blood ties that, at the same time, reestablishes symbolic continuity and aims at the acceptance of difference and loss in order for individuals to “live better”—that is, without overwhelming feelings of
resentment or sadness. This new type of kinship and relationships between adoptees and birth parents that may ensue involves conscious “effort” and “work” as much as in the “self-conscious” relationship between adoptees and adoptive parents (Modell 1994, 13). By focusing on transnational adoptees’ meetings with their Korean birth parents, I define the different types of relatedness that can emerge from these meetings by looking in particular at the birth parents’ circumstances, values, and representations. My own case study provides insight into the everyday, ongoing building of those relationships in the long run. Somewhere in between my idiosyncratic experience and the structural traits of Korean kinship and social organization that pertain to what scholars call Korean culture lies the reality of postreunion relationships that other adoptees may build with their own biological relatives.

Outline

This book is divided into two parts: the first is concerned with the national, public, and collective aspect of the return of Korean adoptees to their birth country; the second turns toward the more private and interpersonal aspect of adoptees’ reintegration within their birth families.

Chapter 1, after a brief summary of the history of transnational adoption from Korea, describes how the South Korean representations of adoptees changed from negative to positive over time in official discourses owing to the globalization of Korea and the construction of the Korean diaspora.

Chapter 2 contrasts these official discourses of reintegration to the everyday encounters adoptees are susceptible to experience. A series of impressionistic vignettes stresses that the pace of change in people’s everyday reactions, opinions, and prejudices may be slower than in political discourses in the national and international spheres.

Because of these discrepancies between official discourses and the real interactions between adoptees and South Koreans, chapter 3 shows how South Korean society undertakes symbolic actions to integrate international adoptees as an ambiguous group that stands in between cultures despite the enterprise of recuperation described in the first chapter. We will see, however, that if the symbolic actions obviously stand for rites of passage—of incorporation—their goals are unclear.

Next, chapter 4 revisits the televised meetings mentioned in introduction and sheds light on a different moment, venue, and means of integrating international adoptees to the motherland. Even if some participants cannot find their relatives after their appearance on the show, they are nonetheless, despite their nationality, somewhat reintegrated within the Korean people
via the television program hosts’ discourses on physical resemblances, and production of collective emotions related to family separation and of the collective memory of an antediluvian universe where family relations were unproblematic.

The last chapter within part I, chapter 5, shows how this television program is a ramification of meetings of the divided families separated by the war and by the partition between North and South Korea. In other words, through television, transnational adoptees are integrated in the greater history of the nation and into a narrative of loss and sadness that covers up individual circumstances and responsibilities.

Confining the role of television to state propaganda—in the ideological assertion that the war is the ultimate cause of the migration of 200,000 Korean children—is to limit the comprehension of its use by South Korean society and especially the birth families themselves. This book sheds light on a still understudied facet of the media’s place in societies in the anthropology of media. In fact, the first part lays out the social, political, and historical context and the collective and external conditions of possibility for transnational adoptees and their birth families to meet. The televised meetings are the moment and space where the state and the families intersect.

Part II of this book analyzes the narratives of family separation created by the televised program participants even in a context of strict limitation of time and the larger enterprise of standardization of the collective memory as seen in chapter 4. Adding to the literature on child circulation and its conflict with internationalized norms of plenary adoptions, chapter 6 describes similar practices of rural, poor Koreans and how one exclusive option became the rule after the Korean War: transnational adoption. The stories this chapter relates challenge the war narrative and put a name on the persons who decided to divide their own and others’ families.

Chapter 7 consists of ethnographies of first meetings between transnational adoptees and their birth families. These examples are representatives of the different outcomes of the family meetings. It analyzes the socioeconomic situation of the birth families and infers the future of the relationships not so much in terms of failure or success but rather as more or less sustained modes of relatedness. Meetings that lead to the severance of ties seem like failures insofar as one sees the family relationship monolithically: either as presumably complete relationships based on biological kinship or simply as nonrelationships.

To better illustrate the point that between these two poles there exist other possibilities of relatedness for transnational adoptees and their birth families, chapter 8 provides the readers with my own experience of “relating” to my
birth family over the course of a decade. Anecdotes will convey a sense of how flexible and fluctuating my relationship with my birth family feels, but how real and no less important than my relationship with my adoptive family for the ongoing construction of who I am.

Going back to the televised meetings, chapter 9 focuses on this specific feeling of relatedness as orchestrated, performed, and expressed through tears by the media and the people. It tries to answer these questions: Why are these meetings necessary? Why are they considered the “best” meetings? By channeling and taming ambiguous emotions of anger, guilt, and resentment ritually, the program is a mediating agent that produces that specific feeling for the best interest of the various parties involved. In that sense, we can see the media as an instrument of social welfare for the people involved in adoption, both domestic and transnational.

Finally, chapter 10 draws a parallel between feelings for the lost and feelings for the dead. Within this frame of interpretation, the televised meeting appears as a cathartic moment of potential closure for all parties, one that produces a certain order within families. The meetings create relatedness, leaving open options of relationships—including the cessation of contact—but they never reconstitute families according to the ideal model of biological kinship.

The conclusion ties together the themes laid out throughout the book and enlarges the scope of this study, which has targeted mostly the South Korean side of transnational adoption with its specific theoretical interest in kinship and media. I engage in a dialogue with other scholarly works that focus on other countries and common themes such as the globalization of kinship, the politics of reproduction, and the idea of return—in the hope that others might generate further research on transnational adoption in birth countries.