

Representations of Lost Children in South Korea

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Evoked in a popular South Korean family search television program, children circulation practices – including international adoption – evidence willful separations, mostly thought of as temporary.

Today, married women search for their illegitimate child or a child from a previous marriage. Many mothers meet these children in secret while fathers never appear. The problem lies in how to explain these often desperate actions to create brief encounters when all conditions prevent reintegration of the child?

I argue that this phenomenon is due to the evolution of the status of children, as demonstrated by the recent ritualized treatment of aborted fetuses by Buddhist monks. Described as restless souls unable to reincarnate and haunting their mothers, the dead children need a specific ritual. Converting the inauspicious into auspicious dead, or separating the malicious dead from the living, is also the main task of shamans.

The lost child, the orphan or the international adoptee who participate in the show are all marginal, inscribed in no patriline, whose possible death is dangerous. Accordingly, the hosts of the show systematically ask international adoptees if they resent their parents. As means to localize and pacify the lost child, the family reunions are appropriate rituals as necessary as ephemeral.