BETWEEN GOODBYES

A FILM BY JOTA MUN

POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Table of Contents

Film Summary

When a queer Korean adoptee reunites with her birth mother in Seoul, long-buried cultural misunderstandings and unspoken regrets surface. With tenderness, humor, and determination, both mother and daughter navigate the heart-wrenching legacy of international adoption.

Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and is designed for people who want to use *Between Goodbyes* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. Be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit **https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/**.

A NOTE TO FACILITATORS

Dear POV Community,

We are so glad you have chosen to facilitate a discussion inspired by the film *Between Goodbyes.* Before you facilitate, please prepare yourself for the conversation, as this film invites you and your community to discuss experiences of queer adoptees, transnational adoption, family dynamics, mental and emotional health, and cultural identity. These conversations require learning truths about society, culture, and personal histories that typically have not been taught in schools. We urge you, as a facilitator, to take the necessary steps to ensure that you are prepared to guide a conversation that prioritizes the well-being and safety of LGBTQ+ individuals, adoptees, and immigrant families in your community. Importantly, this film shares experiences through a lens of joy and resilience, rather than focusing on trauma, and we hope this guide will aid you in conversations that expand understanding while maximizing care, critical curiosity, transformation, and connection.

Tips and Tools for Facilitators

Here are some supports to help you prepare for facilitating a conversation that inspires curiosity, connection, critical questions, recognition of difference, power, and possibility.

Share Community Agreements

Community Agreements: What Are They? Why Are They Useful?

Community agreements help provide a framework for engaging in dialogue that establishes a shared sense of intention ahead of participating in discussion. Community agreements can be co-constructed and created as an opening activity that your group completes collectively and collaboratively. **Here is a model** of community agreements you can review. As the facilitator, you can gauge how long your group should take to form these agreements or whether participants would be amenable to using pre-established community agreements.

Opening Activity (Optional): Establishing Community Agreements for Discussion

Whether you are a group of people coming together once for this screening and discussion or a group whose members know each other well, creating a set of community agreements helps foster clear discussion in a manner that draws in and respects all participants, especially when tackling intimate or complex conversations around identity. These steps will help provide guidelines for the process:

- Pass around sample community agreements and take time to read aloud as a group to make sure all participants can both hear and read the text.
- Allow time for clarifying questions, make sure all participants understand the necessity for the agreements, and allow time to make sure everyone understands the agreements themselves.
- Go around in a circle and have every participant name an agreement they would like to include. Chart this in front of the room where all can see.
- Go around two to three times to give participants multiple chances to contribute and also to give a conclusive end to the process.
- Read the list aloud.
- Invite questions or revisions.
- Ask if all are satisfied with the list.

Chosen Family

Families that are bonded together through voluntary ties are referred to as chosen, or voluntary, family. Although sometimes chosen families replace families that are formed through biogenetic ties or legal ties (such as adoption), they can also complement other family relationships. Chosen family members serve as a key source of care and support for one another. Members of a chosen family may celebrate holidays together, serve as one another's emergency medical contacts, and share meals and resources.

Confucianism and Korean Family Life

Confucianism refers to the value system based on the teachings of Confucius (551-479 BCE), a Chinese philosopher. Confucianism serves as a latent code of ethics that has guided social relationships in China, Japan, and Korea for over 2,000 years. It positions the family as the fundamental unit of society, upholding the necessity of marriage and childbearing, with particular importance on wives bearing a male heir. Confucianism has been used to justify patriarchal family relationships, with utmost authority given to the male head of household. According to traditional Confucian values, wives are to obey their husbands, their in-laws, their parents, and their sons. Although Korean attitudes toward gender equality have become more favorable over the past decades, Confucianism continues to influence social norms, family dynamics, and perceptions of character.

Culture

Culture refers to learned patterns of behavior, attitudes, and values shared by a group of people. Culture encompasses observable behaviors, such as food and greetings (e.g., shaking hands or bowing), but also includes what people consider to be good and bad, normal and abnormal. Not all members of a culture will exhibit the same behaviors or hold the same attitudes and values.

Diaspora

A diaspora is a group of people who are forcibly pushed from their homeland and dispersed to other places where they settle for long periods of time. Often, members of a diaspora share a collective sense of their homeland, think of it as their true or ideal home, and relate to it in a way that shapes their identity.

Engaged Buddhism

Engaged Buddhism, pioneered by Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, integrates Buddhist practices such as awareness of suffering, paying attention, practicing loving-kindness, and interconnectedness, with social and environmental justice. Engaged Buddhism may manifest in myriad ways, including, but not limited to, community service, environmental activism, and education and awareness.

In Reunion

Adoptees and their original families who have met one another and who consider themselves in some degree of ongoing contact or ongoing relationship are thought to be "in reunion." However, there is no definitive frequency of contact or sense of emotional closeness required to be in reunion, and sometimes, adoptees and original families inadvertently lose contact with one another over time or become estranged unexpectedly. Therefore, being "in reunion" can be a precarious state.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, a term coined by UCLA law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, refers to the ways in which various social identities combine to create specific experiences of oppression. For example, a woman who is Black will experience marginalization differently from a woman who is White and differently from a man who is Black. In *Between Goodbyes,* Mieke's identities as a queer, nonbinary, Korean transnational adoptee raised in the Netherlands impact her communication in reunion and their experiences in Korea.

Original Family

Also known as first family or birth family, an adoptee's original family refers to their biogenetically related kin, which includes parents, siblings, and extended family members. Were it not for the separation caused by adoption, the adoptee would have remained with their original family.

Transnational Adoption

Transnational adoption, also known as intercountry or international adoption, is a legal and sociopolitical process that occurs when an infant or child is born in one country and, after being transformed into a "legal orphan" who is then eligible for adoption, a person (or a couple) in a different country assumes legal and personal responsibility for raising the child as part of their family. The term "transnational" signals the multidirectional flow of people, information, and resources across national boundaries. For example, adoptees and their families may travel back and forth between their birth country and their adoptive country, and as they maintain relationships, information is also circulating transnationally.


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Participants

Mieke

Mieke is a Korean adoptee who was born in Seoul in the 1980s and adopted to a couple in the Netherlands, where she was raised. Mieke identifies as gay, which is relevant to her interactions with her Korean family in the film and to her identity in Korea.

Okgyun

Okgyun is Mieke's original, or birth, mother. The Korean word for "mom" is *umma*, 엄마 .

Mieke's Korean Father

Kwangho is Mike's original, or birth, father. The Korean word for "dad" is *appa*, 아빠 .

Mieke's Korean Siblings

Mieke has three older sisters, in order from eldest to youngest: Minjin, Mikyung, and Taekyung.

Key Issues

Between Goodbyes is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Transnational adoption
- Family member separation and reunion
- Korean culture
- Intercultural communication
- Chosen family
- Grief
- LGBTQ intersectional identity

Background Information

Transnational Adoption as a Legacy of Military Occupation in South Korea

Transnational (a.k.a., international, overseas) adoption from South Korea to Western countries is a consequence of many factors, the most significant of which is the American military presence in Korea before, during, and after the Korean War. The U.S. military has held a strong presence in what is now known as South Korea since 1945, and the relationship between the two countries has been an alliance built on mutual, complementary interests. The United States is able to maintain a robust and strategically located military presence in East Asia, while Korea maintains the protection of an economic and military superpower. Early on, this relationship laid the groundwork for the industry that became transnational adoption.

The Korean War (1950-1953) devastated Korea, killing an estimated three to four million Koreans and creating an estimated 200,000-300,000 widows. Hundreds of thousands of children were lost or abandoned, families were separated, and poverty was high, with a per capita income of less than $100 USD. In the decades that followed, South Korea experienced almost unimaginable economic growth and is now one of the wealthiest countries in the world. However, this recovery came at the expense of some of the country's most vulnerable populations–women and children.

Because the American military maintained its presence in South Korea even after the fighting ended, the Korean government supported the establishment and maintenance of *kichijon* (기지촌), camptowns near American military bases that catered exclusively to GIs. The South Korean government, eager to keep American soldiers satisfied and to bring money into the Korean economy, helped to build and maintain brothels within *kichijon*. For many young women, employment in *kichijon* was their only option; even if they were tricked into becoming sex workers, they saw no way out. Government authorities commended the young women working in *kichijon* for fulfilling their patriotic duty to Korea yet did nothing to protect them from violence, disease, exploitation, and unplanned pregnancy.

Unsurprisingly, one outcome of the continued presence of GIs in Korea and of prostitution in *kichijon* was mixed-race children, also known as GI babies. Although some servicemen married the Korean mothers of their children, most left these women and their children behind upon returning to the United States. These mothers, viewed as shameful and immoral, and their children, viewed as a stain on Korea's monoethnic culture, were ostracized and abused in their daily lives and had no legal protection or assistance from the government. Although some mothers endeavored to raise their children, going so far as dyeing the child's hair black to camouflage their mixed race, many agreed to relinquish them, hoping that their futures abroad would be less bleak.

The Business of Transnational Korean Adoption

In addition to the discrimination against GI babies, other factors coalesced to create what Kimberly D. McKee has labeled *the transnational adoption industrial complex*. American missionaries and NGOs flocked to Korea after the war, providing free food and clothing to the homeless and hungry, many of whom were children. These missionaries and NGO workers returned to their respective churches and organizations, sharing photos and stories, which turned into campaigns that promoted the idea that Korean infants and children needed rescue and that Christian Americans were called to do their part. When Harry Holt, an evangelical Christian farmer from Oregon, adopted eight Korean infants and children in 1965 and a year later founded Holt Adoption Program, transnational adoption from Korea became cemented as an accepted and then, increasingly common practice.

By the mid-1960s, the majority of infants and children sent abroad for adoption were of full Korean parentage. These children were labeled as orphans, yet most had at least one living parent, and nearly all had living relatives. They were children of single mothers, divorcées, widows, or poor families; they were children from families with twins or too many daughters, or children with special needs. Although some children were survivors of abuse or neglect, most original families would choose to keep and raise their children if they had sufficient resources and support.

To those with power, transnational adoption seemed like a win-win: Korean leaders were able to rid the country of poor, "excess" children, thereby not having to provide social infrastructure to support them. For their part, many western adoptive parents felt as though they were helping a child in need, an act that reflected their Christian faith. The impact on those without power–Korean mothers and Korean adoptees–was assumed to be positive, although their voices and stories remained unheard for decades.

Overseas adoption, which eventually expanded to other Western countries (e.g., Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, and others) boosted the struggling Korean economy, bringing in an estimated $15-20 million per year. Orphanages and adoption agencies profited from adoption, creating circumstances where corruption flourished, particularly as demand for Korean babies abroad increased. Stories of atrocity–mothers being coerced into giving their child up for adoption, mothers being told their newborn had died in childbirth when the child had been taken to an orphanage, maternity homes offering poor mothers prenatal care and housing in exchange for their babies–punctuate the narratives of Korean birth mothers who have come forward.

In March of 2025, South Korea's Truth and Reconciliation Commission released findings that a lack of government oversight in overseas adoption processes led to widespread human rights violations, including falsified documents, child switching, lack of parental consent, and lack of appropriate notice to guardians whose children had been found lost or abandoned. To many adoptees, this public revelation confirmed what they already knew–that transnational adoption, which many people view as an act of love, is, as Kit Myers has written, an act of violence.

Transnational Adoptees and Korean Culture

Over the years, many of the over 200,000 adoptees sent abroad for adoption have returned to Korea. For some, the trip is a once-in-a-lifetime event, given the expense, time, and effort required to travel from their adoptive country to their birth country, a place where the language and culture are now foreign. Other adoptees, however, choose to travel to Korea regularly or move to Korea either temporarily or permanently. If they choose, they may try to learn the Korean language, a language that is categorized as a "super-hard language" by the U.S. Department of State, which describes it as "exceptionally difficult for native English speakers."

In addition to language, transnational Korean adoptees who return to Korea may find it challenging to understand Korean culture. The culture's seemingly rigid, hierarchical expectations for appropriate behavior can be puzzling for those raised in Western countries. Korean cultural expectations are based on social roles such as age, gender, and status, and have their roots in Confucianism, an unspoken code of ethics that has guided Korean society for over 1,000 years. Confucianism dictates that the traditional (patriarchal, blood-related) family is the fundamental unit of society and the ideal template for all other social institutions and interactions. Within and outside of the family, men and elders occupy the top positions of the social hierarchy, with women and children below. Individuals are expected to place their own wants and needs below group harmony and collective good.

In practice, Confucian values have been used to marginalize women in many ways–through deep-rooted prejudice against single mothers, social stigma toward divorced women, lower employment salaries for women, an expected obedience of daughters and daughters-in-law to their parents and in-laws, and more. Although younger generations, especially women and marginalized populations, have challenged gender discrimination over the years (Hyun 203; Philips and Yi 1960), Confucian ideals continue to pervade Korean society and impact everyday interactions and opportunities.

In many ways, Korean culture stands in sharp contrast to that of many Western countries, where individualism and personal choice are conflated with freedom and are therefore viewed as unquestionably good. People–adoptees included–raised in countries such as the United States, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, and Australia, tend to believe that, regardless of social roles such as age, gender, or position or role, all people are equal and should be able to exercise their individual rights without fear or judgment.

LGBTQ+ rights are a clear example of the distinction between Western and Korean cultural values. Whereas Korea does not legally recognize same-sex marriage or partnerships, the Netherlands has recognized gay marriage since 2001. In fact, the Government of the Netherlands website states that the country promotes LGBTQ+ rights worldwide because "everyone should have the right to be themselves. It doesn't matter who you are or whom you love" ("Equal Rights for LGBTQ+'s"). Unsurprisingly, the Netherlands ranks second out of 175 countries in its acceptance of LGBTQ persons, whereas South Korea ranks 75th. Other countries that have high acceptance scores include Norway, Sweden, Denmark, France, Germany, and the United States, all of which comprise the top receiving countries for Korean adoptees. Because traditional Korean culture upholds the patriarchal family as the foundation of society, many older Koreans presume that young adults–Korean transnational adoptees included–are heterosexual and should get married and have children. Although young Koreans, in particular, have become increasingly accepting of LGBTQ+ identities in recent years, a recent survey found that over half of Koreans would be opposed to living close to someone from the LGBTQ+ community. This social conservatism can create uncertainty for LGBTQ+ Korean adoptees who travel to Korea and/or reunite with their original families.

Transnational Korean Adoptees and Original Families in Reunion

Reunions between adoptees and their original families appear regularly in the media and on social media. However, most Korean adoptees and their original families who search for one another do not reunite due to a host of reasons, including, but not limited to, withholding of information by adoption agency employees, incomplete or inaccurate information in adoption agency paperwork, secrecy and shame surrounding the pregnancy and/or relinquishment of the adoptee, and illness or death. Those who are able to reunite often find themselves at the beginning of a new chapter, rather than at the "end" of their adoption and identity journey.

When adoptees meet their Korean families, they may be hoping to gain understanding of why they were placed for adoption, who they resemble in their family, and information about their medical history. Original family members, however, may be hoping to express remorse and seek forgiveness, and sometimes, to symbolically regain lost time through expressions of affection such as touch and food. These differences may lead to confusion or discomfort, even amidst moments of joy and healing. Reunions often contain a multitude of emotions.

Birth parents, especially birth mothers, have memories of pregnancy, childbirth, and sometimes, time spent with their child. Combined with the high value that Korean culture places on shared bloodline, these memories may lead original parents to feel that reunions are an opportunity to reconnect with a long-lost son or daughter. They may treat their child as though no time has passed or as though they are trying to make up for time that was lost. In contrast, Westerners tend to believe that relationships are built through shared interactions over time. Although Korean adoptees raised in the West may have a strong desire to reunite, they are also likely to view their original family members as strangers or acquaintances until they have had time to "build" a relationship. In this way, original parents and adoptees may be approaching the reunion with different beliefs about who they are to one another, which can create a discrepancy between expectations and what actually happens in reunion.

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DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Starting The Conversation

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- What feelings did this film leave you with?
- With whom do you identify most in this film? Why? What does this tell you about your own identity?
- What did you learn about Korean adoption that you didn't know before viewing this film?
- Why do you think the film's title is *Between Goodbyes*?

Family and Culture

- How do you think Mieke defines family? How do you think her Korean family defines it? Where do you see similarities and differences in these definitions?
- How did Korean cultural views of gender and family impact Ok Gyun's decision to relinquish Mieke for adoption?
- Where in the film do you see examples of cultural differences between how Koreans view family relationships versus how Westerners view family relationships? How do you think family members in reunion can build meaningful relationships with respect for these differences?

Transnational Adoptees and Original Families In Reunion

Mieke's experience of her first reunion meeting (in the Netherlands) differed from her Korean parents' experiences of the meeting. How do you explain these differences? Why do you think Mieke needed space after this first meeting?

- How would you describe Mieke's relationship with her sisters? Why might adoptees' relationships with their original siblings be different from their relationships with the parents?
- Mieke's Korean parents would like her to move to Korea. Why might this be difficult for Mieke, particularly given that she identifies as queer?

In Reunion, Moving Forward

Toward the end of the film, Ruth, the founder of tRuthTable–a support group for mothers who have lost their children to adoption, tells Ok Gyun, "When we reunite, that is the time when we really need to grieve. Both sides have to realize all that is lost. Once you have grieved, then you can move forward." Do you agree? Why or why not?

- Why do you think it was challenging for Mieke to communicate her boundaries to her mother regarding the family's upcoming visit to the Netherlands? Why do you think it was challenging for Ok Gyun to understand and respect these boundaries?
- What do you foresee in the future for Mieke and her original family's relationship with one another?

OPENING/CLOSING ACTIVITY

OPTIONAL

In *Between Goodbyes*, we see Mieke and her mother, Ok Gyun, trying to make sense of one another and to reach a mutual understanding of what their relationship will be. Now it is your turn to reflect on your own family relationships. Here are some questions to get you started:

- How do you define family? How do you think your definition of family reflects the culture you were raised in?
- Consider sharing your definition of family with other people, including people you watched the film with, or family and friends. Ask them to share your definition with you. Compare and contrast these definitions, and discuss how people's upbringing and experiences shaped their definitions.
- How can adult children and their parents build loving, close relationships, even across differences and distance?

TAKING ACTION

- Sign up to volunteer or support Emergency Action for Records Storage (EARS), which advocates for the safe and fair transfer and storage of Korean adoptees' files to the National Center for the Rights of the Child. https://earsonncrc.org/
- Donate to Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (G.O.A.'L.) and check out the resources that they offer to Korean adoptees. https://goal.or.kr/
- Subscribe and listen to adoptee-produced podcasts that center adoptee stories, such as Adapted, Adoptees On, and The Janchi Show

Resources

Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (G.O.A.'L.)
Founded in 1998, G.O.A.'L. provides services and support for adoptees who have returned to Korea. The only adoptee-led nonprofit and NGO in Korea, G.O.A.'L. assists adoptees with birth family search, DNA testing, F-4 residence visa processes, and applying for Korean language scholarships. G.O.A.'L. also provides support for adoptees living in Korea who find themselves in crises related to mental health, housing, healthcare, finances, or immigration status.

Harlow's Monkey
Harlow's Monkey is a blog and website focused on transracial and transnational adoption from an adult adoptee's perspective. Dr. Jae Ran Kim, professor of social work, renowned adoption scholar, and Korean adoptee, founded Harlow's Monkey in 2006. The blog contains thoughtful, informed, and nuanced perspectives on transracial and transnational adoption, and the website contains a wealth of resources including links to conferences, books, films, research articles, and counseling information.

Intercountry Adoptee Voices (ICAV)
The Intercountry Adoptee Voices website provides resources for intercountry adoptees regardless of their birth country or adoptive country. ICAV aims to connect and support adoptees worldwide through social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as the organization's website and blog. ICAV centers adoptee voices in art, literature, research, and other creative endeavors, advocating for the rights of adoptees and original families.

International Korean Adoptee Associations (IKAA)
IKAA is a broad organization comprised of local and regional Korean adoptee organizations throughout North America, Europe, and Australia. Founded in 2004, IKAA aims to develop leadership and to connect adoptees and adoptee organizations throughout the world. IKAA hosts the international Gathering in Seoul approximately every three years, attracting up to 700+ adoptees.

Credits & Acknowledgments

About the Author

Sara Docan-Morgan (she/her) is Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse. She is the author of the monograph, *In Reunion: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Communication of Family* (2024, Temple University Press).

Dr. Docan-Morgan's scholarship on Korean adoptees and family communication has been published in *Adoption Quarterly, the Journal of Family Communication, the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, Communication Quarterly, Family Relations, and the Journal of Korean Adoption Studies*, as well as in edited volumes. Her research focuses on how personal identity and family identity are formed, maintained, and negotiated through discourse in both adoptive and birth families. She teaches courses in interpersonal communication, family communication, race, and gender. Dr. Docan-Morgan was a Fulbright Senior Scholar in Seoul, South Korea from 2016 to 2017 and has received various teaching awards throughout her career. She serves on the editorial board for the *Journal of Family Communication* and has presented her research to adoptees, adoptive parents, and Korean birth families. Her career-long goal has been to create opportunity for conversation and curiosity surrounding difference and relationships.

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