

Why Study Weddings? A Confessional Introduction

If one perceives an event—a performance or ritual—as a traditional survival, one may “naturally” exclude from one’s data the modern, commercial, or evangelical forces that are everywhere in the culture but “peripheral” to the event. If, however, one sees the performance or ritual as emergent, predominantly located not in a past, but in a possible future, modern things become interesting and will be much more prominent in one’s corpus of inscriptions.

James Clifford (1990:56)

I attended my first Korean wedding in 1970 as a recently arrived Peace Corps volunteer. At the time, it was a depressing experience. The public wedding hall, grey and drafty, with its loudspeakers directing guests to simultaneous ceremonies in the several different rented chambers, reminded me of an intercity bus terminal. I was sufficiently unacculturated to be jarred by the custom of relinquishing an envelope of money at the door, where it would be torn open and the amount of my wedding gift matter-of-factly recorded in a ledger. A stranger handed me a small wrapped package while executing a slight, stiff bow, a ritual that seemed merely to enhance the commercial flavor of our transaction. On this occasion the package would yield a small plastic container in bright orange, suitable for use as a sugar bowl.

The ceremony seemed rushed and pro forma, from the pianist’s banging out of “Here comes the bride” to a final scrambling of family and friends for commemorative photographs. My sense of alienation was compounded by knowledge of the groom’s courtship, a hasty selection between two candidates proposed by matchmakers on the eve of his departure for foreign study. The ceremony in the wedding hall underscored for me the seeming acquiescence of the Korean women I knew as they prepared for their inevitable march down the aisle and into domesticity,

dramatizing the differences between their dreams and my own. Obviously, I had a lot to learn.

Most disturbing of all was the utter familiarity of it, the cliché of a bride in a white dress and veil marching down the aisle on her father's arm to meet a groom in a dark dress suit (see fig. 1). In 1970, I was still seeking "the real Korea" amid the grim high rises and urban grime of the capital city. I had seen photographs in travel brochures and one reenactment for tourists of the old wedding rite, a sequence of arcane procedures performed in colorful and distinctive costume. Like the graceful old Korean roofs of tile or thatch, this too was being discarded for what then seemed but shabby imitations of Western forms. Korean friends who shared a romantic image of the Korean past assured me that the old wedding was still performed "in the countryside," a mythical place where they as well as I still believed the real Korea existed.¹

A decade later, with some irony and a more seasoned perspective, I designed a research project on contemporary weddings, a project requiring hours of avid attendance in commercial wedding halls and long conversations with newlyweds. The initial design was simple, a study of first-generation working women in and around my old field site of "Enduring Pine Village" to learn how their earnings translated into marriage payments (Kendall 1985b). The modest ambitions of my initial research plan were soon overwhelmed by the realization that to write about weddings is to confront some of the vast complexities of Korean life at the end of the twentieth century.

BRIDES, GROOMS, AND BEYOND

As with many new projects, the seeds of this one had been planted in a previous field trip. In 1977 and 1978, while conducting research on women's rituals for my dissertation, I had witnessed firsthand the preparations and attendant gossip over the weddings of Kkach'i and Oksuk, daughters of the two village households with whom I was most closely tied. My landlady's daughter Kkach'i, while working in a factory in Seoul, had found a man and, when her parents disapproved of the match, had baldly cohabited with him until she became pregnant and her family acquiesced

1. Such perceptions are by no means unique to Korea. Walter Edwards describes how, during his research on modern Japanese weddings, an informant suggested that he find some remote rural village "where they still have the *real* wedding" (Edwards 1989:143).

to a humble and hasty wedding. Oksuk had also worked in a factory until, upon claiming her severance pay, she had delivered her savings to her stepmother, the shaman Yongsu's Mother,² and announced that she was ready to have Yongsu's Mother find her a suitable husband and arrange her wedding. Oksuk's savings financed the most lavish dowry yet seen in the village. Kkach'i's Mother was necessarily envious of the good show orchestrated by Oksuk's stepmother, who, in turn, grumbled that Kkach'i's Mother had gotten off easy, without the stress of matchmaking and elaborate ceremonial exchanges of gifts.

By their inevitable comparisons, they introduced me to some of the pragmatics of "love" (*yŏnae*) versus "matchmade" (*chungmae*) weddings. More striking yet was the contrast between generations; the initiative and pluck shown by both Kkach'i and Oksuk in their two very different marriage strategies would have had no place in the world where their mothers' marriages were made. Kkach'i's Mother was barely seventeen years old when she became the wife of a man whose face she had not seen until her wedding day. Oksuk's stepmother, after an early indiscretion, was married to an impoverished widower several years her senior; she wept tears of protest all the way to her husband's house.³ Radical juxtapositions of past and present, of recent and precipitous transformations, thread their way through nearly every discussion about Korean weddings, even as questions of "how" and "whom" one marries have been critical components of Korean discourses on modernity for nearly a century. As I would come to understand them, Korean weddings are about the past and the future, about morality, about identity, and about the lives of women and men as they have moved through Korea's twentieth century.

"BUT WHY WEDDINGS?"

When I went to Korea in the early 1970s as a Peace Corps volunteer and when I returned in 1976 to research my dissertation, I was unmarried. A recent college graduate when I joined the Peace Corps, my first years in Korea coincided with a season in life when Korean women were expected to marry, would do so with the help of a matchmaker if no suitable

2. Addressing women by the names of their children or grandchildren is standard Korean practice. "Yongsu's Mother" is more than a description of a relationship ("Yongsu's mother"); it is a term of address.

3. The story of her marriage is told in *The Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman* (Kendall 1988).

“groom material” (*sillanggam*) was otherwise forthcoming. By the end of my first fieldwork, I was thirty years old and solidly in the category of “old maid” (*noch’önyö*). During the fieldwork years, I had been asked at least once a day (usually several times a day) the inevitable question of a first-met stranger, the one that followed “How old are you?”: “WHY AREN’T YOU MARRIED? YOU OUGHT TO BE MARRIED!” Then followed the intimations that I must have set my sights too high, the suggestions from well-intentioned village women that they would help me so I could complete my research, go home, and assume a more normal life. Marriage seemed to be on everyone’s mind.

A scan of travellers’ accounts and of ethnography suggests that marriage has been an abiding Korean preoccupation. Cornelius Osgood offers the wry comment that “Marriage under the old Korean system was almost as certain as death” (Osgood 1951:103). Moose, an early missionary, followed an observation on the scarcity of spinsters in his community with a touch of hyperbole: “In fact, so far as I have been able to learn, there is not one in the entire kingdom” (1911:77).⁴ Korea remains a marrying country. In 1990, one out of twenty-five women in their thirties was single, a statistic greeted in some quarters as an indication of an alarming rise in spinsterdom since 1980, when eighty-four out of every eighty-five women in their thirties would have been married (*Korea Herald* [Yeoun-sun Khang], 5 June 1992:Weekend 1). Kim Eun-Shil, conducting fieldwork in Korea as a native anthropologist and unmarried woman, notes, “When I asked women why they got married, they laughed at my absurd question and said that they wanted to live a ‘normal life’” (1993:59).

Those who cannot afford to marry engender pity. By the mid-1980s, the plight of rural bachelors, unable to lure migrant brides back to the countryside, had become a national issue, brought to public consciousness by the media and in some instances by the protest suicides of unmarried men.⁵ I recall one interview on the breezy veranda of a farmhouse where

4. Early accounts also comment on the scarcity of brides as evidenced by numbers of reluctant bachelors (Miln 1895:81; Savage-Landor 1895:68). Foreign observers attributed this lack to concubinage.

5. A spate of articles appeared in the popular press in the mid-1980s (*Han’guk Ilbo* 21 April 1984; *Yöng Reidi* March 1985:114–119; *Newsreview* 30 July 1988:26; *Newsreview* 30 June 1990:33; *Newsreview* 7 July 1990:34). As an indication of the vehemence of the rural bachelors’ desperation, the slogan “Women! Marry rural men!” was spray painted on the wall of at least one rural bus terminal (Abelmann 1990:Ch.5, 11).

a crusty old farmer explained to me how “Nowadays, the women want to live clean, and the men in the countryside cannot find wives. There are thirty- and even forty-year-old bachelors.” I asked if there were any such men in his own village. “No, but I saw it on television.”

In 1987, the Seoul YWCA responded to the rural bachelors’ plight with a program that brought groups of prospective rural grooms and urban brides together for social afternoons in the hope that matches would be struck (*Chosŏn Ilbo*, 22 September 1987:10).⁶ In 1988, the Federation of Agricultural Cooperatives set itself the target of arranging 1,900 marriages, but succeeded in seeing only 777 couples wed (*Newsreview*, 4 March 1989:30). By 1990, several social organizations, churches, companies, and even a television program were all attempting matchmaking for rural bachelors (*Newsreview* 30 June 1990). At the time of this writing, a National Agricultural Cooperative Federation program has sent rural men to Sakhalin in the Russian Far East to seek brides of Korean ethnicity, and other brides have come from the Korean autonomous region in China, replicating a pattern of decades past when farmers in relatively prosperous Kyŏnggi Province sought brides from the impoverished southwest of the country (*Newsreview*, 29 February 1991:8–9; Lee Man-gap 1960:97–98). From a feminist perspective, these events play as one more chilling instance of a global “traffic in women,” and yet within Korea, those who aid and abet such marriages have been described as performing a “good work” in helping the unwed to marry.

All well-intentioned matchmaking is potentially a good work, and many an amateur matchmaker would remind me, “They say that if you make three marriages, you’ll go to Heaven.” Helping to bring about the marriages of others, in any way, is generally considered a good work. As we shall see, extended kin frequently and generously contribute to the weddings of siblings, nieces, and nephews. Because everyone ought to have a wedding, various social welfare agencies facilitate the weddings of impoverished couples who lack both material and social resources. Every Saturday, the Korea Legal Aid Center for Family Relations (*Han’guk Kajŏngbŏmnyul Sangdamso*) sponsors a wedding, fitting the bride and

6. The YWCA officer who explained this program to me described the very rigorous screening the prospective grooms must pass, but indicated that the YWCA would accept nearly any woman who showed an interest in participating in the program. As early as 1982, more than a hundred rural men and urban women participated in group matchmaking events, one at the Women’s Welfare Building (*Chosŏn Ilbo*, 3 September 1986:69) and another sponsored by a professional marriage bureau (*Chosŏn Ilbo*, 13 July 1982:8).



Figure 2. Forty-seven-year-old boy and eleven-year-old man. Photographed by Roy Chapman Andrews, 1912, AMNH Neg. No. 219080. Courtesy of the Department of Library Services, American Museum of Natural History.

groom in a borrowed wedding gown and dress suit, giving the bride a beauty treatment, and providing a master of ceremonies, music, flowers, simple gifts, and photographs. This model has been adopted by the Korean Mothers' Club (*Taehan Ōmōni Hoe*). The YWCA and the Seoul city ward offices offer biannual group weddings (*haptong kyōrhonsik*) where up to a dozen couples are wed by a single master of ceremonies, and group weddings have also been sponsored by the military. So pervasive is the notion that making weddings constitutes a positive social act that even

counselors in professional marriage bureaus, proprietors of commercial wedding halls, and purveyors of dowry goods claim the moral high ground in asserting the benevolent intentions of their enterprises.

The wedding ceremony initiates Korean men and women into adulthood. References to the day one “puts up the hair and becomes an adult,” a commonplace of wedding hall speeches and congratulations, evoke the old practice whereby the groom’s childhood pigtail was once bound up into a topknot and a bride’s hair pinned into a chignon at the nape of her neck as obvious visual indications of their new standing in a delicate hierarchy of status and deference. The explorer-naturalist Roy Chapman Andrews described a 1911 encounter with “a little fellow wearing a hat, with his hair knotted on the top of his head. He was only a child, and I said to the cook, ‘Is that little boy really married?’ ‘Whom do you mean,’ he asked, ‘that man?’ pointing to the child” (Andrews 1919:33). Andrews photographed the “eleven-year-old man” standing next to a pigtailed forty-seven-year-old “boy” whose unfortunate bachelor condition was probably related to his servile status (fig. 2).⁷ Even without the visual marker of a married man’s or woman’s coiffure, marriage still implies membership in an adult universe. Writing of an urban neighborhood in the 1970s, Chung Cha-Whan observed that “an unmarried man, even though he is not a boy, is socially not a man. He is treated like a boy. He is teased and often addressed as: ‘You, unmarried man, what do you presume to know?’ ” (Chung 1977:94).

Because the wedding is an initiation, one need only experience it once, unless one’s new partner has never experienced the rite. When I asked naively about the “ceremony” (*yesik*) of an elderly couple in Enduring Pine Village who had begun to live together and intended to register their marriage, I was told with a chuckle that “a widow and a widower don’t need a ceremony.” Further inquiries confirmed a general notion that more than one wedding ceremony in a lifetime is an awkward idea. Yet I did not comprehend the weightiness of a wedding ceremony until Hangil got married in the summer of 1983.

7. Older Koreans to whom I have shown this photograph remark not only upon the contrasting coiffures of “boy” and “man” but also upon the differences in probable status implied by their grooming: the young married man immaculate in a gentleman’s long overcoat; the middle-aged bachelor without coat, bare-headed, and of a generally scruffy appearance. Some have suggested that the latter might even have been the youth’s servant. This would account for the evident discomfort of the two subjects of this photograph, posed side by side.

HANGIL'S STORY

Hangil's Mother was my neighbor during my first fieldwork, an amiable widow with a limited store of social and economic capital. In 1977, Hangil worked as a laborer in Righteous Town and lived with a woman in his mother's home. I remember the cold winter day when Hangil's son was born. In 1983, the child was in grammar school, the wife had "run away," and a successor, by some reports two successors, had also fled. The sympathetic neighbor who brought me up to date explained that Hangil was not a bad person; "he just drinks a little too much." He needed to settle down. In the eyes of the village, Hangil was still a bachelor. Although he had lived with more than one "wife" (*saeksi*) and fathered a son, Hangil had never celebrated his wedding.

A bride was found through family connections, a once-married woman who, village gossips immediately and correctly assumed, had been divorced because she was childless; but then Hangil already had a son. Hangil's uncle, head of one of the most prosperous houses in the village, agreed to finance the wedding, providing for the bride's gifts of jewelry and clothing and the cost of the feast. It reflected well upon Hangil's uncle that he had sponsored Hangil's ceremony, even as wagging tongues might have already begun to reproach the wealthy (by village standards) uncle for Hangil's extended bachelorhood. Still, it was an economical ceremony, held in the village hall to circumvent the cost of a commercial wedding hall. A feast of noodles was served up outside in the manner of an old country wedding.

My former landlady and fictive mother, so addressed as "Ömöni," pointed out to me that the bride, having been married once before, did not need a wedding ceremony, that the festivities were for Hangil's benefit. Ömöni and her neighbors held the hope that by having a wedding and "becoming an adult" (*öřüni toeda*) Hangil would gain self-control. In one such conversation, perhaps in response to a flicker of skepticism on my face, the shaman Yongsu's Mother pointed out to me that another neighbor's son, married three months previously, had been transformed from a reckless youth into a responsible husband.

As I went about my fieldwork that summer, I retained my doubts about the auspicious prospects of Hangil's marriage, but I was hearing other affirmations of the wedding ceremony's transformative power. Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1967, 1968) would have been pleased to hear Yongsu's Mother advise the beleaguered wife of a drunken husband, "Next year, if you can possibly afford it, have a wedding cere-

mony so that your husband will feel like an adult, like the father of his child." Spokespersons at the Korea Legal Aid Center for Family Relations and at the YWCA described their charity wedding programs as benefitting vulnerable women insofar as the ceremony, over and above the separate legal registration, enhances the stability of a marriage.⁸ In the course of my own interviews, I was meeting couples who, years after they had legally registered their marriages, used their savings to hold a proper wedding ceremony because it was something they felt they ought to do. While the simple act of registering a marriage is both necessary and sufficient to constitute a *legal* marriage in the eyes of the Korean state, legal registration is distinct from and utterly insufficient to the *social* recognition of matrimony conferred in the performance of a wedding ceremony.⁹

When I returned to Enduring Pine Village nearly two years later, I asked about Hangil. All was well, the neighbors claimed. He was working more and drinking less. His wife was a gem of industry and tact, and Hangil's Mother now waddled around the village with an air of contentment. Improvements in the fortunes of Hangil's household were justly attributed to the daughter-in-law's character, but these developments also validated prior assertions that Hangil had needed a wedding in order to settle down. From other women in another place, I heard the dark side of such hope in the story of an innocent country woman married to an urban ne'er-do-well through the machinations of his desperate mother. The bride became a battered wife who, at the time of our interview, was on the verge of filing for divorce. The mother-in-law's ill-placed hopes were comprehensible, even to the pitiful bride.

I was no stranger to anthropological notions of "passage rites." In my earlier work on shaman ritual, I had borrowed upon Victor Turner's

8. Participants in a recent study of marriage practices among the urban poor expressed similar sentiments: that a marriage ceremony gives the couple social acknowledgement as adults and makes a cohabiting male partner feel more responsible for his family (Pak Sukcha 1991:107). Some of Kim Eun-Shil's informants in a working-class neighborhood expressed worry and doubt about a man's leaving them if their relationship was not acknowledged with a wedding ceremony (Kim Eun-Shil 1993:203). An Chöngnam (1991:178) relates how participants in group charity weddings speak of the event as having rid them of abiding resentment and frustration (*han*).

9. In no sense is the legal registration of a marriage necessarily simultaneous with the performance of a wedding ceremony establishing the marriage as a social condition. Legal registration usually takes place weeks or even months after the wedding. Couples attempting to expedite a visa application for residence abroad might find it expedient to register their marriage before the ceremony, and members of the working poor may postpone the ceremony for several years after a registration undertaken to legitimize the birth of a child.

(1967, 1968) explications of the transformative power of curing rituals in rendering the afflicted as healed (Kendall 1977, 1985a: Ch. 1). I understood, almost as doctrine, that weddings moved people from one social category to another, a mechanism propelling social actors through a structure from “unmarried” to “husband” or “wife,” much as the moving sidewalk in an airport transports the traveller from the domestic terminal to the international. A mix of ritual studies and common sense, however, had not prepared me to appreciate Korean weddings as events of far greater consequence than their American counterparts, as rites that might transform not only the “status” but more fundamentally the character, the social and moral integrity, of those who celebrate them. The urgent and righteous tone in Korean discourse about the proper conduct of weddings stems from this perception. Journalists opine, for example, that the superficiality of the modern Korean wedding ceremony, in contrast to the solemn old Confucian rite, contributes to a rising divorce rate (*Reidi Kyōnghyang*, 23 October 1985:261) even as the prototypical Western-style wedding is seen to correlate with an even higher divorce rate in the United States (*Chosŏn Ilbo* [Yi Kyut’ae], 4 May 1983). The notion that good rituals make better people stems from Korea’s Confucian heritage wherein all demonstrations of propriety (*ye*, Chinese *li*), including the correct performance of critical passage rites, are seen as fostering harmonious human relationships and a well-run social order. I invoke “Confucianism” gingerly here, for in so much popular writing on Korea the word becomes a reductionist black box that “explains” all things from economic success to failed democracy.

In suggesting that most Koreans vest ritual with greater moral import than do most North Americans and that the roots of this attitude lie in a body of ideology and practice we call, for verbal economy’s sake, “Confucianism,” my aim is not to foreclose discussion, but rather to open it and let it in recent history. Given that ritual is taken seriously as an instrument and symptom of the social condition, my intention is to show how changes in the performance of wedding rites, and perceptions and discourses about the performance of rites, have been set at play in the shifting social milieu of recent and contemporary Korea.

TIME AND THE FIELD

Johannes Fabian (1983) illuminates a pernicious tradition of the discipline whereby anthropologists describe the “non-Western other” as removed

from history, of timelessness as a function of social and geographic distance from the metropole. Fabian's tidy dichotomy of a "Western" anthropology that casts its gaze upon distant "non-Western" subjects founders on the complex circumstances of contemporary nation-states and the flowering of non-Western anthropologies. Even so, his basic insight that anthropology often renders its subjects in the past tense and so exoticizes them is sustained in many different circumstances of anthropological practice, including those that define an *internal* other. Rosaldo writes of how, in the Philippines, ethnographers lavish attention upon cultural minorities who are seen as having "cultures" amenable to study, while Landinos and lowlanders are seen as "civilized" and consequently "so much like 'us' that 'our' common sense categories apparently suffice for making sense of their lives" (Rosaldo 1989:199). Similar internal dichotomies characterize the ethnographic enterprises of China and Vietnam, both primarily concerned with the study of minority peoples and, to a more limited degree, with "peasants" (Schein 1993 for China). Within the West, Mediterranean societies are inscribed as the "aborigines" of Europe, as an Other still inhabiting a past (Herzfeld cited in Sant Cassia 1992:3).

Until very recently, anthropologists working in Korea—Korean, Western, and Japanese—have shared in the unstated assumption that a "more genuine" Korea could be observed in rural villages, untainted by modern conveniences and urban life-styles. One went to "the field" by leaving Seoul, boarding a bus or a train, and going to the countryside. Granted, the village where I resided in the mid-1970s was little more than an hour and a half from downtown Seoul, but even this journey, involving a single transfer from an intercity bus to a country bus, was sufficient to mark my transformation into anthropological mode and lend authenticity to the things I described.

"'Country' and 'city,' are very powerful words," Raymond Williams tells us, because they have come to stand for vast bundles of association in the human experience (1973:1). Although Korean city and country carry their own specific history of a people moving through time, there are Korean resonances in Williams's characterization of a countryside which represents simple virtue and innocence, but is also a place of ignorance and limitation, and a city which is a center of achievement, learning, and light, but also a place of worldliness and ambition (Williams 1973:1). City and country give space to a polarity of "tradition" and "modernity." These dichotomies are invested with commonsensical but ambivalent and fluid meanings, as in the story of shifting reactions to styles of wedding ritual from rejection to nostalgia, from celebration to denigration.