

Marriages and Families in East Asia

Something Old, Something New

By Laurel Kendall

In 1984, I began a research project that, in the fullness of time, would become a book. *Getting Married in Korea* is an exploration of courtship, matchmaking, weddings, and related practices and how they had all changed over the course of the twentieth century.¹ In the beginning, I spent a great deal of time in the four commercial wedding halls of a Korean town where brides marched down the aisle in white lace dresses and veils to a pianist's rendering of "The Wedding March." At the end of the ceremony, the couple posed with family and friends for a series of portraits that were part of the wedding hall's services. Then the couple was whisked away and dressed in traditional Korean wedding costumes in order to kowtow to members of the groom's family to whom they offered cups of wine and by whom they were pelted with dates and chestnuts as a wish for fertility. Then, as now, most South Koreans held weddings in the rented space of commercial wedding halls. When I explained what I was up to—an anthropologist studying contemporary Korean weddings, everyone—the wedding hall staff, the brides and grooms, members of the wedding parties—inevitably scratched their heads in bemusement. Shouldn't I be in the villages seeking the rare traditional Confucian wedding rite? Isn't this what anthropologists were supposed to do? Weren't the weddings I was so diligently recording "Western?" Weren't they exactly what I was used to at home?

Their reaction was prompted in part by their own understanding of village weddings as something already exotic, and their misunderstanding of anthropologists as seekers after old custom rather than as scribes of the complexity of contemporary life. Despite some familiar elements, these weddings had very little in common with what I was used to at home.

By the 1980s, what my Korean conversation partners called "the old-style wedding"—a Confucian rite performed according to the old family ritual manual—was vanishing, even in a countryside depopulated when factory work drew rural children to the cities and farmland disappeared under urban sprawl and new satellite cities. In practical terms, the families I interviewed considered the wedding hall ceremony a convenient contrast to the banquets that used to be prepared in the kitchens of rural homes. Young women were emphatic that they wanted to wear a white lace dress and veil, not the flat white make-up and red dots of a traditional bride's make-up. In these same years, in-



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Photo captions, top to bottom:

Sorcerers putting the crown of "good luck" on the head of the painted bride.

Bridegroom views his future wife for the first time.

Carrying the bride to the home of the bridegroom.

All are from Chosen, Korea, ca 1919.

Source: The Library of Congress under the search query of "Korean weddings."

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Korean wedding hall in Seoul, South Korea. Photo by Jérôme Banal in 2005.
Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Samsung_Wedding_Hall.jpg.

tellecuals and members of the pro-democracy Popular Culture Movement were criticizing the commercial wedding hall ceremony as “too Western” and were reviving the traditional wedding in new urban settings: folk village theme parks, the Confucian shrine, and as a commercial service at the Korea House traditional restaurant.

These frequently articulated tensions between “old-style” versus “new” or “modern,” “Korean tradition” versus “Western,” rural/domestic versus commercial service industry, bore out my supposition that wedding rituals were an excellent lens through which to examine larger social trends, and particularly, changing expectations of marriage and family life. Studies of marriage customs in late twentieth century Japan and post-Mao China had already suggested that this was true elsewhere in East Asia.

Weddings with a “Western” or “modern” look had begun to appear in Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese cities in the early twentieth century. Those celebrating marriage in this then-radical new way came from a small intellectual and professional elite, exposed through their Western education to new ideas of individual freedom, including marriage based on personal choice and motivated by romantic love. Symbolically, new wedding styles represented a desire to be modern—to reject what young idealists saw as oppressive and irrational customs.

In these years, young Chinese and Koreans believed blind adherence to custom had weakened their nations, resulting in humiliation by foreign powers. In these circumstances, modernity was closely identified with the idea of patriotism. Many male reformers equated women’s emancipation with national self-strengthening through the ministrations of enlightened “good wives and wise mothers.” Questions of how and to whom one marries brought the idea of modernity into the most intimate domains of family life. Marriage tensions between tradition and modernity, between family loyalty and individual

desire, were painfully evident in early modern novels by authors such as Japan’s Junichiro Tanizaki, China’s Ba Jin, Korea’s Yi Kwang-su, and Việt Nam’s Vu Trong Phung.

What was the “traditional family” that these early moderns defined themselves against? We like to think that we know. Tensions over matchmaking and matrimony have been a perennial theme in popular English-language novels about Asia, from Pearl Buck to the more recent writing of Jung Chang, Amy Tan, and Lisa See. Images readily come to mind: a multi-generation household presided over by a tradition-bound tyrannical or benevolent patriarch (or occasionally a matriarch), domestic intrigues and rivalries, strategies and schemes over the matrimonial prospects of sons and daughters, and their subsequent fates. We have often heard how Asian families favor the birth of boys as a source of agricultural labor, old-age support, and sustenance after death through rites of ancestor worship.

The widespread practice of patrilocal marriage, where brides live with their husbands’ kin, was particularly onerous for women. Brides, often in their teens, left their homes to live among strangers whom they must please and provide with male heirs. Standard accounts of East Asian family life routinely cite the Confucian “three obediences” enjoined on a woman: to follow her father in childhood, her husband in maturity, and her son in old age. Local customs impressed upon a daughter that if she failed to please her in-laws and was sent home, she would disgrace her own family. In Taiwan, a mother would cast a bowl of water after her departing daughter to remind her that just as spilled water cannot return to the bowl, a married daughter cannot resume her old life. Women have not been hesitant to provide personal testimony of disastrous match-made marriages.

However, the enduring literary appeal of a simple formulation: tradition versus modernity, matchmaking versus romantic love, tradition-bound Asian families versus Western-inspired individualism, tyrannical elders and victimized brides, obscures the different stakes and strategies Asian families adopted in order to perpetuate themselves in both past and present. It ignores great variations in social class, local custom, family circumstance, different ways women have navigated family life, and that “Asian families” are and have always been in flux. Moreover, in East Asia today, increasingly visible gay cultures and the possibility of single life for both genders are challenging the heteronormal near-inevitability of marriage and family life.² This essay provides some sense of variation and trends social scientists working in the region today have discerned.

IMPOSSIBLE GENERALIZATIONS

Anthropologists working in Taiwan and Hong Kong’s New Territories in the 1960s, but with demographic data for a much longer period, have argued that the multi-generation Chinese family so familiar in novels was a fragile ideal, best realized either by gentry or by those ordinary farmers who had some economic stake in staying together, usually by diversifying their resources, such as land, a rice mill, or a shop in town. In Korea, wives joined the husband’s family for a short period of training in family custom and became mistresses of their own homes. Historically, and in some durable regional customs, husbands spent

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extended periods living with the wife's family, often until after the first child's birth; the wife was already secure in her status as a mother when she joined her husband's kin.³ In Việt Nam, brides commonly married into their own villages, and when a family from another village claimed a bride, they compensated her home village for her loss. The families of Korean fishermen that favor inheritance by the youngest son seem as exotic to Korean rice farmers as they would to most Chinese. Son-in-law adoption was a possible strategy for sonless families—usually a last resort in China and Korea, but widely practiced in Japan—particularly where artisan and performing arts families routinely inducted promising apprentices.

Japanese family arrangements varied by class and region, and some have argued that "*the Japanese family*" may be an oxymoron. Samurai customs that brought wives into the husband's clan became the basis of modern pre-war family law that vested male household heads with supreme authority. Modernity did not always favor women. In their struggle to reform South Korean family law, feminists have argued that the absolute powers vested in the male household head are a legacy of Korea's early twentieth century experience as an Imperial Japanese colony. In post-war South Korea, family law and various economic policies favor large corporations, and give employment advantage to men who have fulfilled a compulsory military obligation. Such practices reinforced a modern notion, masquerading as tradition, that men serve society as full citizens while women tend the home.⁴ In contemporary Taiwan, policies favoring small family businesses attached to or closer to home have meant that women of all ages are better represented in the Taiwan work force than in South Korea where, until recently, the managerial lifestyle required long hours of work and work-related socializing at a distance from home, a pattern in Japanese corporate employment as well.⁵

Social class questions also affect how a family is made or perpetuated through matrimony. In pre-modern rural Taiwan and Korea, better-off families sent their daughters out as brides and received their daughters-in-law with full ceremony; in Korea, a wedding rite in the bride's family home courtyard publicly validated the family's claims to elite *yangban* ancestry—its ability to form a union with a family of equivalent rank. For farming families in Taiwan, a wedding with processions and banquets was a claim of respectability. In Korea and Taiwan, the poor made other arrangements, adopting-in a girl child who grows up in the family and becomes a wife/daughter-in-law after a simple exchange of ceremonial wine cups.⁶ Changing notions of respectability also foster new attitudes toward courtship and marriage. An anthropologist's field notes from a Japanese village in the 1930s reveal a period of transition from peasant customs that tolerate premarital sexual encounters, to a modern interpretation of old samurai ideals of premarital chastity and formally arranged marriages—practices that validated new claims to modern middle class status.⁷

A gender-conscious perspective offers a different vantage point on East Asian family life. In her now-classic *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan*, Margery Wolf describes Chinese farm households through the eyes of wives, mothers, sisters-in-law, and mothers-in-law. Women, she suggested, conceptualize "uterine families" composed of themselves and their own children, the children whose

interests they champion against the larger corporate family, and against the similarly uterine interests of co-resident sisters-in-law. A mature woman's hard-won position, secured through the birth and carefully nurtured loyalty of sons, would be jeopardized when a daughter-in-law claimed a son's affection. The idea of a uterine family thus answers a conundrum: how by cultural expectation the once-victimimized and powerless daughter-in-law becomes, in the season of time, a tyrannical mother-in-law.⁸

The "uterine family" is a useful way of thinking about patrilocality, but one must also be attentive to the particular dynamics of Chinese family life that inform Wolf's model, an idealization of long-term co-residence of married sons/brothers under one roof and which, in the reality of frequently divided families, makes scapegoats of "narrow-hearted women."⁹ In Korean farm families, these concerns were moot; women either anticipated becoming the mistresses of independent households a few years after marriage, or becoming the mistress of the "big house" when a husband became primary heir. Being chosen as an eldest son's wife, particularly in a prominent lineage, was once a mark of distinction for a bride. Today, South Korean brides see these as burdensome responsibilities and in matrimonial negotiations, a disadvantage for eldest sons, especially lineage heirs. The South Korean family drama *First Son* offers a melodramatic, but still illustrative, take on the conflicted loyalties and responsibilities of a successful urban, white collar, first son.¹⁰

Wolf subsequently built on her uterine family model using suicide rates and profiles for early twentieth century Taiwan that suggested an era when sons gained some say in bride choice, and family politics shifted in favor of young brides over aging mothers-in-law.¹¹ Grievances of aging mothers have been voiced throughout the region, such as when an elderly South Korean widow stated, "Men forget about the hole they come out of and just think of the hole they enter."¹²

Favoring wives over mothers can be linked to demographic shifts throughout the region related to industrialization, urbanization, middle class expansion, reduced family size, and, in Japan, followed by South Korea, a graying population. Industrialization brought significant changes to once substantial agricultural societies typified by small family farms. Employment outside the family, or the prospect of leaving farm for town, probably gave even rural sons some leverage over bride choice—if only the right to glimpse a prospective wife beforehand and reject an undesirable candidate. Large-scale employment of young unmarried women in urban factories—in pre-war Japan in the 1960s, and Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea in the 1970s, and more recently in the People's Republic of China and Việt Nam—assumed a model of dutiful, docile daughters supplementing family income, and regarded factory discipline as an extension of patriarchal authority. While daughters' wages strengthened household economies and educational opportunities for younger siblings, factory work also gave young women leverage in planning and saving for their own futures.¹³ As in the New England mills, even limited free time after a brutal work schedule exposed young women to new social and educational activities, labor politics in the case of South Korea, and new possibilities of consumption and sexuality. Rural children who worked in urban factories rarely returned to the countryside once they married and started their own families.

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In the cities, those in the middle class, as well as educated professionals and business people, valued a lifestyle of conjugality, independent households, and investment in children’s education. Those with more limited means also aspired to and imitated this lifestyle, whenever possible. Family size has shrunk throughout East Asia. The more draconian aspects of China’s one-child policy are well known, but the population policies of South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan were also significant, as were declines in infant and childhood mortality throughout the region over the twentieth century. Educational opportunities and work outside the family also postponed marriage and childbirth. For families with middle class aspirations, the costs of raising and educating a child and maintaining respectable levels of housing and consumption have discouraged large families, and in China, state policies penalized families for unauthorized births. In South Korea and China, demographics suggest that families have used sex-specific abortion to insure the birth of a male child (usually after one or more female births in the South Korean case). In competitive social environments, children in these smaller families are indulged, yet subject to extreme educational pressure, acute among China’s one-child families, but also present in South Korea, and first noted decades ago among Japan’s new middle class.¹⁴

Demographics also suggest that throughout urban East Asia, only widowed or elderly parents are likely to cohabit with married children, a very different power dynamic than young daughters-in-law submitting to the extended training of still-vigorous mothers-in-law. Without substantial state support for elder care, concerns about the adult children’s willingness to assume this responsibility, after living independently, have been widely articulated in Japan. Nor is the issue of elder care strictly an urban matter. Yunxiang Yan’s study of a northeast China village suggests that Mao-era collectivization and ideological attacks on traditional filial piety, followed by a market economy favoring individual accomplishment, have undermined filial piety and the economic basis of parental authority, making generational relationships less deep-rooted and more instrumental.¹⁵

ABOUT MATCHMAKING

Now, throughout the region, couples exercise far more choice over marriage than prospective brides and grooms did a century ago—sometimes with courtship and romance experiences little different from the West. And yet, as conversations with Chinese, Koreans, or Japanese of marriageable age reveal, many couples first meet “by introduction” on the part of relatives, neighbors, mentors, or professional matchmakers. What does “matchmaking” now mean? Throughout East Asia, “arranged marriages” include a formal “first meeting” carefully negotiated by a matchmaker, after which the prospective bride and groom accept or reject the possibility of a courtship. This practice, probably originating with the pre-war Japanese *miai* (or *omia*) vividly portrayed in Tanizaki’s *The Makioka Sisters*, is a compromise between the experienced wisdom of family elders and the personal desires of marriage-age children, and as a means of matrimony in the absence of other options. By the 1980s, when I did research on South Korean weddings, the first meeting had become a subject of women’s magazine advice columns, grudging acquiescence on the part of unmarried children, and a prompt to comedy, as in the television serial, *The Woman Who Had*

100 First Meetings. At the same time, commercial dating services promising “scientific” matching methods based on personal surveys and offering discounts on weddings, dowry furniture, and honeymoons were appealing to young professionals who wanted to avoid well-intentioned ministrations of aunts and neighbors, but had not yet found satisfactory marriage partners.

Common sense understandings of “matchmaking” mask the fact that marriage negotiations have very different stakes for different players. For early modern Japanese nobility, as for wealthy Japanese business families in the late twentieth century, marriages were, respectively, carefully negotiated strategies to secure political advantage, and alliances that would benefit the larger family enterprise.¹⁶ Pak Wan Sō’s novel of middle class Korean family life, *Staggering Afternoon*, describes different sibling approaches to matrimony—not as an appeal to personal freedom versus acquiescence to family obligation, but as one sister’s mistaken sexual attraction to an unpromising young man versus another’s equally misguided pursuit of wealth and comfort through marriage to an older widower. More recent South Korean novels and films contrast the marital aspirations of women who came of age in the materialist 1990s with the idealism of those who matured in the politically turbulent 1980s.¹⁷

At the other end of the social spectrum, professional matchmaking offers an option for those whose problematic circumstances make it difficult to find a mate, but getting married is widely seen as a necessary social condition. Indeed, throughout East Asia, different government and social welfare organizations undertake formal matchmaking activities. In South Korea, churches and social welfare services have addressed the problematic marital prospects of rural bachelors who were left in the depopulated countryside to tend the family farm and care for aging parents.

BORDER-CROSSING BRIDES

In the 1990s, the much-discussed South Korean bachelors began to find wives from among the Korean population in the Russian Maritime Provinces and the Korean minority in China. In the new millennium, Việt Nam, the Philippines, Mongolia, and Uzbekistan became sources of brides as a Korean cohort of disproportionate male births approached marriageable age. Although Uzbekistan brides were probably also ethnic Koreans, Mongol women were described as having common cultural roots, and Vietnamese women as having a similar culture. These matrimonial developments—along with a significant guest worker population—are challenging the idea of South Korea as a mono-ethnic, mono-cultural entity. Although the number of border-crossing marriages is small relative to South Korea’s population, recently two soap operas featured foreign brides as a primary plot device, a measure of how these women, and the South Korean families they changed, have captured the popular imagination.¹⁸ Marriages of South Korean women to foreign men—predominantly from North America and Europe—have a longer history. Although these marriages were not always welcomed, they were within a cultural logic where the out-marrying daughter adapts to an alien environment. Bringing a foreign bride into a patrilocal family as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law necessitates rethinking common-sense understandings of what constitutes a “Korean family.”

South Korea is not unique. Rural bachelors in northern Japan have sought Filipina brides for several decades, and today, the border-crossing bride is a frequent traveler, crisscrossing the map of Asia amid other migrations brought about by globalization. Nicole Constable argues that these marriages are both quantitatively and qualitatively different from anything that has gone before, aided by faster and more widely available transportation, telephones, and the Internet.¹⁹ Women from the Hakka-speaking community in Calcutta seek brides from their ancestral village in Guangdong Province, China for Hakka bachelors back in India; Hmong men in the US whose families fled Laos at the end of the second Indochina War seek brides and female companions among ethnic cousins in Southwest China; and Filipina wives and their Japanese husbands anticipate comfortable Philippines retirements.²⁰ For some Filipinas and highly-educated Vietnamese brides who marry low-wage workers of Vietnamese ancestry, marriage represents status decline, even though the brides are from poorer countries and follow a common pattern of attraction to men from wealthier countries. Brides, however, see these initially disappointing marriages as opportunities for mobility and as a means to benefit their natal families.²¹

Bridal migrations also occur within national borders. In 1960s South Korea, rural bachelors from more prosperous Kyōnggi Province sought brides from the impoverished southwestern Chōlla Provinces. In China today, marriages take place over unprecedented distances as men from the flourishing coast seek brides in poorer parts of the interior where, among minority populations, the one-child policy was not strictly enforced and marriageable women are more numerous.²²

Both domestic and global long-distance marriage raises the specter of possible “trafficking,” using false promises or outright kidnapping to entice prospective brides, and placing women in situations of extreme vulnerability without support from or recourse to their families. These practices recreate the worst aspects of patrilocal marriage in the distant past, when brides might have only sporadic contact with their own kin in distant villages, and the daughters of the very poor were sometimes sold. The international press has been particularly keen to report trafficking stories from China, describing women who are sent, against their will, to husbands in distant and difficult regions, and Vietnamese women enticed with promises of work, then sent as brides to Chinese villages. Discussions of trafficking make only a thin distinction between abducted brides and forced prostitution. As Constable and several of her contributors note, trafficking is a tricky concept, often uncritically used to inscribe not only the forcibly abducted or willfully deceived, but all long-distance brides, as victims. In contrast, they show how many women accept long-distance marriages with open eyes and a strategic sense of their possible futures.



Contemporary Chinese bride and groom celebrating their wedding.

Source: <http://www.imaginechina.com/>.

WHITE WEDDING DRESS AND VEIL: A CONCLUDING IMAGE

Families vary over time and space. Today, some broad, interconnected themes appear: reduced family size, elder care issues, family strategies to approximate or preserve middle class status, depopulated rural hinterlands, mobile brides, and in some places, bride scarcity as an unintended consequence of population policies that resulted in disproportionate male births. Limited space forces me to make generalizations at odds with my desire to disabuse readers of easy generalization about “Asian families.” Any good work of anthropology will give you a sense of how these common themes play out in the particular conditions and specific histories of each time and place.

As a final image, in line with these intentions, consider the bridal photograph, in picture frames and wedding albums all over Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, and Việt Nam. The image may be singular, but the stories behind these images are multiple.²³ The photograph may not even be a product of the wedding day. The white lace dress and veil was not available to many Chinese and Vietnamese couples, even in the recent past, but the photograph is a commodity that can be posed for and purchased after the fact. In a Vietnamese home, I saw a large wall poster of a mature-seeming bride and groom, he in a dark suit and tie, she in a white lace dress and veil, a portrait taken to commemorate their twentieth anniversary. Constable describes the “bridal” portrait of a Chinese woman who, at the time she posed for it, was long estranged from her husband, but who wanted a portrait of herself in a wedding dress and veil nonetheless.²⁴ In Taiwan, couples become the stars of a day-long professional photo shoot, a series of magazine-like portraits taken in professional make-up and different costumes—including the inevitable white lace dress and veil—in several different picturesque settings. The bridal shoot is more significant for these couples than the actual wedding banquet their parents will host; the image of the carefully made-up bride, professionally pinned into her finery, marks the end of a carefree sin-



Portrait session from the documentary *Wedding Through Camera Eyes* by Kijung Lee.

Source: <http://www.imaginechina.com/>.

gle life and the anticipated drudgery of matrimony.²⁵

These pre-nuptial shoots originated in Japan but are now popular throughout East Asia, although perhaps without the particular gloss that Taiwan couples put on them. Kijung Lee's documentary, *Wedding through Camera Eyes*, reveals how South Korean wedding photography creates an emotionally satisfying romantic image of marriage, even in the absence of romance.²⁶ In the film's first segment, the photographer tells the couple to pose for a "hot kiss," and the groom describes how he has long fantasized about lifting "the woman" in his arms for the requisite photograph. The final segment follows a busload of honeymooners on Cheju Island as they travel from scenic spot to scenic spot to be posed and photographed in sequence. Months later, the bride describes how she thumbs through her album to remember the romantic moments of her honeymoon, moments posed, and in effect created, by the photographer. If early modern East Asians took up the white dress and veil to symbolize a new vision of marriage and family life, the process has come full circle with the vision embodied in a mass produced commodity; but where the images of brides and grooms seem uniform, their back stories are multiple. ■

NOTES

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