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Spring's featured wedding custom:

The Korean gift box delivery

Description

In the Republic of Korea (South Korea), a groom's male friends typically deliver a box of gifts to the bride on a night shortly before the wedding. The groom purchased these gifts, and his friends deliver them on his behalf. The delivery entails a long process of playful bargaining between the groom's friends and the bride's family.

When the groom's friends reach the bride's neighborhood, they leave their bus or taxi and walk to the bride's house. They carry their box of gifts through the streets, calling "Gift box for sale!" to passersby. Two of them might carry red and blue silk lanterns, traditional wedding items whose colors symbolize male and female (red for male and blue for female). The gift box they carry is usually a simple nylon suitcase, convenient for carrying, or a box wrapped in a suitcase. A wealthy groom might buy an expensive chest for the purpose, typically one made of lacquered wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The gift box contains fine clothing, jewelry, and related accessories for the bride, some of which she will wear on her wedding day.

The men make their way to the bride's house or apartment (typically her parents' residence as well), where the bride's parents, siblings, and other relatives await them. The bride's family has prepared a feast for the groom's friends, but it will be some time before they enjoy much of the food. One of the groom's friends carries the gift box on his back, and the groom's friends call the carrier their horse. This man pretends to be a horse, at least to some degree, and as such he refuses to speak.

When the groom's friends reach the bride's house, they make noise outside, and soon the bride's father and other male members of her family welcome them and invite them in. The group refuses to enter the house or even to near the door. The designated leader of the group says his horse is too tired and hungry to proceed. He requests money as well as food and drinks from the bride's father. The bride's relatives bring out some snacks and drinks to meet these demands, but they leave most of the food inside in order to lure the men inside with promises of a feast. After some bargaining, the bride's father sets an envelope of money on the ground to persuade the group to come a few steps closer to the door. The groom's friends might advance far enough to claim the envelope, but at that point, they stop.

The groom's friends continue their playful haggling with the bride's family for an hour or two. Every time the bride's father fails to persuade the group to come closer to the house, he calls for more snacks or he places another envelope of cash on the ground. If the groom's friends are particularly unimpressed with the offerings, they walk away with their "horse" and the gift box he carries, shouting "Gift box for sale!" But they don't actually sell the box, and eventually they

return. Meanwhile the female relatives inside the house grow more and more restless. The female relatives and the bride herself are supposed to stay in the house and take no part in the bargaining, but it is common for at least one of them to get fed up, burst out of the house, and yell at the groom's friends for taking so long to come in, for trying to eke as much money as possible out of the family, for letting the meal get cold. In fact the full fee that the bride's family will pay the groom's friends has been set in advance. But even when the bride's father has handed over all of his envelopes of cash, the groom's friends sometimes demand extra money before they agree to enter the house and hand over the gifts.

This improvisation can take any number of turns, but eventually the bride's father exhausts his resources and the groom's friends agree to bring the gift box inside. At this point, they enter the house and place the box on a steamer that contains a ceremonial rice cake cooked for the occasion. In a traditional house, this steamer has been placed before the altar to the god of the home. The bride, her mother, or another relative opens the box and reaches into it without looking. She pulls out one of two lengths of silk that have been packed on top of the other gifts. If she pulls out a bundle of blue silk that is tied with red thread, the relatives say that the couple's first child will be a boy, while a bundle of red silk tied with blue thread forecasts a girl. After this, the bride takes each piece of clothing, cloth, jewelry or other accessory out of the box, inspects its details, and passes it around the room for everyone to admire.

The bride's family serves a big meal, and the atmosphere is festive, perhaps including music and even dancing. After a while, the groom's friends leave the bride's house for a night on the town. The bride, groom, and other friends might accompany them. The gift box fee is usually more than enough to cover the group's night out, so the friends spend an extravagant night in taxis and clubs, carousing. If any money remains at the end of the night, they might spend it on subsequent nights out, on a gift for the couple, or on a drink with the newlyweds between their wedding and honeymoon.

Discussion

The anthropologist Laurel Kendall spent far longer than I can considering the gift box delivery and interpreting it in the context of Korean culture, which she knows much, much more about than I do. I highly recommend her book *Getting Married in Korea* to anyone who is interested in the role of weddings and marriage in late twentieth-century Korean life. I will not summarize her arguments here, but everything I write about the gift box delivery is based on her descriptions of this custom and is deeply influenced by her arguments about it.

What interests me most about the gift box delivery is that, in refusing to carry the gift box into the house, the groom's friends temporarily halt the series of wedding rites. According to Kendall, it's generally understood that the wedding ceremony can't occur until the gift box is successfully delivered; at a practical level, the bride usually plans to wear something in the box on her wedding day. In refusing to give the gift box to the bride, the groom's friends are, in effect, opposing the wedding.

There are good reasons to oppose any wedding, good reasons why even the best-matched couple should not get married. Two people who choose to marry anyway must confront these reasons, and often their close friends and family members must do the same. They must also confront feelings of loss that accompany this major transition. In Korea, the transition to marriage is particularly significant, because almost everyone marries, and a wedding is considered the crucial rite of passage to full adulthood. I am interested in the possibility that the gift box delivery might function, in part, as a way of dramatizing the inner struggles of the bride's relatives between desire for the marriage and opposition to it.

In the gift box delivery, the bride's close male relatives, particularly her father (or a surrogate if her father is dead or estranged from her), confront the groom's friends, who refuse to hand over the gift box and thus threaten the wedding. By paying for the gift box, the bride's father chooses to champion the marriage. In most cases he pays a larger sum for the gift box than he is comfortable giving up. Grudgingly, he spends an hour or more doling out envelope after envelope of cash. Might he experience this series of payments as a final, difficult expression of commitment to support his daughter's marriage? Might he experience the series of payments as a process of staking more and more of his trust on a groom who might or might not make his daughter happy?

Kendall comments at length on the asymmetrical opposition between the bride's family members and the groom's friends. I am particularly curious about whether Koreans who have enacted this ritual think of the bride's family as its emotional center and the groom's friends as mere catalysts of their experience. Do the groom's friends experience the gift delivery only as a rare excuse to make easy money, taunt their elders, and let loose? Or do they also experience it as the last act of holding on to their friend's single status before relinquishing him (with the gift box) to marriage and adulthood? Maybe they even experience their refusal to give up the gift box as a final expression of their own doubts about this marriage; it's even conceivable that they grow more confident in the marriage as the bride's relatives state symbolically (with payments) that they value the marriage enough to do everything they can to make it work.

I am also interested in learning what effect this event has on the bride and groom themselves. The brides in Kendall's research almost universally express frustration with the length of time it takes for their gift boxes to come in, probably in part because they can only sit inside and wait. The groom is usually absent from the gift box delivery. But he negotiates the gift box fee with the bride's father in advance, performing "the delicate task of presenting his friends' predetermined fee to the bride's father before the event, of championing his friends' desires without offending his future father-in-law" (Kendall, p. 197). It's no wonder that the groom excuses himself from the night of struggle between his friends and his future in-laws, groups with competing claims to his allegiance.

I must admit that I have slim evidence that any participants experience the gift box delivery as a final act of commitment to a wedding they're unsure about. But I've discussed the possibility because I would love to see more wedding rites and preparations that helped partners or their loved ones confront their doubts about marrying and their feelings of opposition to the marriage. Most of the weddings rites and preparations that I've witnessed encourage participants not to

overcome these feelings but to suppress them. What form might you give to a ritual that addressed your own misgivings about getting married? Would you confront your doubts and fears as if they were your antagonists, or would you identify with them? Would you bribe your doubts and fears? How might you commit more of yourself to your future of marriage?

Reference: Laurel Kendall, *Getting Married in Korea: Of Gender, Morality, and Modernity*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1996.

If you've participated in the gift box delivery, I would love to receive your comments about your experience – or your corrections to my description.

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