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Summer's featured wedding custom:

P'yebaek

Most Korean couples perform a ceremony known as *p'yebaek* after their wedding ceremonies. At its core, this is a rite of bowing: the bride and groom bow to each of the groom's relatives and optionally to each of the bride's relatives as well.

P'yebaek is a private ceremony to which only the participants are invited. The couple might perform *p'yebaek* immediately after the wedding ceremony, at the end of the feast following the ceremony, or at a later date. If the couple marries in a church, as many Christian Koreans and Korean-Americans do, they might perform the ceremony in a small room within the church; most modern church officials do not see any conflict between *p'yebaek* and Christian practice. If the couple marries in one of the commercial wedding halls so popular for weddings in Korea, they typically use a room designated for *p'yebaek*. This space is decorated to look like a room in a traditional Korean house because couples have been performing a rite resembling *p'yebaek* for centuries, and the traditional ceremony took place in the groom's parents' house. In fact, many couples still perform *p'yebaek* at the groom's parents' house.

The typical Korean wedding ceremony is similar to its western counterpart, and *p'yebaek* is the only rite from the traditional Korean wedding ceremony that is still widely practiced. So perhaps it's appropriate that, for this rite, the bride and groom change into versions of the dazzling clothing traditionally worn by Korean aristocrats in daily life and by fortunate commoners for their weddings. I won't describe the costumes here, but I recommend looking up *hanbok* (a general term for Korean traditional clothing) and pictures of traditional Korean wedding attire on the internet.

A typical *p'yebaek* begins with the bride and groom kneeling on the floor before a low table that holds wine, dates and/or jujubes, chestnuts, meat, and other foods. The groom's parents kneel on the opposite side of the table. The bride and groom rise to bow to the groom's parents. Korean culture abounds with bows that are used for greeting, parting, thanks, apology, religious services, and other purposes, but most bows in secular life merely require bending at the waist and neck. The *p'yebaek* bow is more difficult to execute, especially for a woman wearing traditional clothing, which is as cumbersome as it is beautiful. Two friends or wedding hall attendants usually help the bride bow. For the *p'yebaek* bow, the bride "raises her covered hands to her face and, supported by a female attendant at each elbow, sinks to the floor in a slow genuflection, then bends forward at the torso and lowers her head, long sleeves spread on the floor in front of her. She pauses, then rocks back onto her feet, rises, and bows from the waist. [The groom], unassisted, bows in unison with his bride" [Kendall, pp.45-6].

After the bride and groom bow to the groom's parents, they serve them a glass of wine. In some cases a wedding hall attendant serves the wine on behalf of the couple, or the groom's parents serve themselves. The groom's parents might also sample a few of the foods on the table, but this is typically informal.

Then the groom's parents toss a few chestnuts and dates at the bride. These are symbols of fertility, and the parents might entreat the couple to have plenty of children. The chestnuts and dates are also considered a general blessing on the couple's future. The bride tries to catch as much of the proffered food as possible in a long white cloth (or, in some cases, extremely long white sleeves). When *p'yebaek* is over, the bride and groom will collect all the fruits and nuts they caught. They will eat the blessed foods in the days following the ceremony. After tossing food, the groom's parents bless the couple and give them a bit of advice on marriage. Finally they place an envelope on the table that contains a small gift of cash in exchange for the bow the couple gave them. The newlyweds are expected to spend this money on their honeymoon.

Now every older or married member of the groom's family repeats this exchange with the couple. The oldest, and therefore most revered, family member (or couple) greets the newlyweds first, and other relatives follow, older first, younger later. The newlyweds bow and offer wine to each aunt or cousin, and the relative pelts them with dates and chestnuts, and offers congratulations, advice, and an envelope of kow-tow money. Finally the groom's younger siblings might greet the couple, but in this case the siblings are typically the ones to bow, and they do not give cash to the couple.

Since the mid-1980's, it has grown increasingly common for the bride's relatives to participate in *p'yebaek*. Perhaps the majority of couples now double their bows by honoring every member of the bride's family. If the bride's relatives are included, their roles are identical to those of the groom's relatives. The bride's parents typically receive *p'yebaek* immediately after the groom's parents.

When the bride and groom complete their many bows, they exchange a glass of wine. Then the groom gives his bride and his mother separate piggyback rides around the room. While piggyback rides were not traditionally part of the *p'yebaek* ceremony per se, they were among the traditional wedding rites. Modern interpretations of the piggyback ride tend to focus on the groom's new responsibility to support his bride and his eventual responsibility, as an established adult, to support his aging parents. I have never read of a groom also taking his father or his bride's mother on his back, or of a bride carrying anyone.

You might be wondering why the bride's family has not always been involved in *p'yebaek*. Sometime between the 15th and 18th centuries, it became standard for a Korean bride (and her groom) to live the rest of her life in her husband's parents' household.¹ *P'yebaek* marked a bride's incorporation into the groom's family and household. For three days after the wedding, a couple would stay in the house of the bride's family, and then the groom would lead his bride and all her property in a procession to his house. From that day on, she was considered to be exclusively a member of her husband's family, while her husband retained his original family membership. Traditional Korean families, like families in all Confucian cultures, were quite hierarchical. The typical family was governed by the oldest man in the household, and the daily lives of the women in the household were controlled by this patriarch's wife. So it made sense for a bride to bow in greeting and deference to all the elder members of the household she was joining, but not for a groom to bow to the bride's family, which would never be his own. In fact grooms did not begin bowing to their own families beside their brides until the 1960's or 1970's. Today almost all grooms bow with their brides; they explain that it's a gesture of thanks to their relatives for their support and a way of greeting their families for the first time as married men. Since Koreans

consider the wedding the rite of passage that transforms a boy into a man, this greeting is important: in a sense it's a new man introducing himself to his relatives through *p'yebaek*.

Today most couples consider *p'yebaek* a rite to honor their families. Interviewees note that their family members are mere spectators at their western-influenced wedding ceremonies, but that *p'yebaek* allows them their rightful place as participants.² Korean culture remains family-oriented, and marriage is considered to be a family matter more than the uniting of two unattached individuals. Couples no longer live with the groom's parents, and their ties to the bride's family might be as strong as their ties to the groom's, but they are expected to carry on their family lines, to care daily for their parents in old age, and to shoulder many other family responsibilities, for instance helping to pay for their siblings to go to college or get married.

Bowing in Korean culture is more full of meaning than I, a white American with minimal contact with that culture, can appreciate or describe, but I can say that Koreans often bow to express humility or gratitude. A bow is also a small gift. I imagine that newlyweds hope to feel some humility, gratitude, and generosity when they bestow a bow on each relative. Of course, some interviewees merely recall feeling exhausted by all the bows they performed at their weddings. But one woman says that when she and her groom received a *p'yebaek* bow from her younger brother, it helped her recognize that she really was the older sibling, if only by a year, and that this meant she must take responsibility for her brother.³ In Korea as in most of the industrialized world, not as much productive work takes place within the extended family as it once did, so where a bride of yore might have bowed with dread of her mother-in-law's daily demands, perhaps it is easier for today's bride to feel generosity and respect when she bows to her in-laws. If you have participated in *p'yebaek*, I would love to hear what it made you feel and how it affected your sense of your role in the family. If you're not Korean, you might consider what gestures or actions you could include in your wedding to honor your parental family and your new in-laws.

Sources

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

UCLA's Korean Folklore Online Archive, <http://projects.cdh.ucla.edu/koreanfolklore/>

Presentation of traditional Korean wedding ceremony and exhibit of associated Joseon period artifacts, Korean Cultural Center of Los Angeles, May 23, 2007.

1. Over the course of the 20th century, this practice became much less common. Now the vast majority of Korean couples start their own households.

2. Interview with Melody Kim found in UCLA's online Korean Folklore Online Archive at http://projects.cdh.ucla.edu/koreanfolklore/search/show_data.php?data_id=138&dbname=kfl2003win

3. Interview with J. Kim found in UCLA's online Korean Folklore Online Archive at http://projects.cdh.ucla.edu/koreanfolklore/search/show_data.php?data_id=132&dbname=kfl2003win

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