Amsterdam University Press

The Twelfth International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS 12)
https://doi.org/10.5117/9789048557820/ICAS.2022.008

A Longitudinal Study of Korean Marriage Culture

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ABSTRACT

This small-scale study aims to trace the changes that have occurred in the Korean marriage culture in a time span of about one hundred years, more specifically, since the beginning of the 20th century, when Korea opened its borders to foreigners, until the present, as well as to identify the causes that have led to these changes. The theoretical framework I employed is *content analysis*, whereas the content (data) subjected to analysis is represented by fragments excerpted from a number of novels authored by Korean and Korean-American writers, which are categorized according to their themes and coded in terms of non-verbal elements. The focus is on such nonverbal codes as rituals, exchange of artifacts, eligible age for marriage, as well as on the status roles created by marriage in the Korean culture. The primary data is supplemented with information coming from the Korean society trend survey, conducted by Statistics Korea. The findings of the analysis reveal a slow, though obvious change in the marriage traditions that can be related to Western influence, the spread of Christianity, as well as to the massive industrial, technological, and economic development of Korea.

Keywords: Marriage, Non-verbal elements, Status roles, (South) Korea.

1. INTRODUCTION

All over the world, people establish friendships, develop intimate relationships, cohabit and raise children together in agreement with the cultural norms, rules, and expectations of the society they live in. According to Ponzetti (2003, vii), "[o]f all the institutions that have shaped human life, marriages and families have been the most important". Researchers' interest in these two institutions has stemmed from the relationship they found between one and the other: from a historical point of view, marriages bring about families, and the family, considered to be the basic social unit of society, provides individuals with personal and social security. Marriage does not only fulfil biological functions (of satisfying one's sexual needs and of procreation), but also a social one "by enhancing solidarity and preserving the cultural ethos of a community" (Srivastava 2019, 159). As Russell contends,

> "Marriage is something more serious than the pleasure of two people in each other's company; it is an institution which, through the fact that it gives rise to children, forms part of the intimate texture of society, and has an importance extending far beyond the personal feelings of the husband and the wife" (Russell 1929/2009, 32).

At the same time, both marriage and family institutions create status roles that are sanctioned by society. For instance, a married man is considered to have reached adulthood, as he becomes the head of his family.

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For most cultures, marriage represents the beginning of a new life, a "rite of passage", which needs to be celebrated. This need for ceremony is dictated by the wish of the spouses-to-be and their families "to recognize and formalize their union" (Monger 2004, 10). But the marriage customs and ceremonies differ from culture to culture, from community to community, and, within the same culture, from one period of time to another.

The aim of the paper is to offer a view on how Korean marriage practices changed in the past century. The roadmap of the paper is as follows: section 2 briefs the reader on the marriage in Korea until the beginning of the 20th century. Section 3 schematically presents the theoretical framework employed (i.e. content analysis), the research methodology and the research questions that guided the analysis. In section 4 I analyse fragments excerpted from a couple of literary masterpieces authored by Korean and American-Korean authors, which illustrate the changes in the marriage practices. Section 5 is dedicated to the conclusions.

2. A BRIEF LOOK AT KOREAN MARRIAGES BEFORE THE 20TH CENTURY

A short historical overview of Korean marriage would help better understand the changes that occurred in this institution in the shifting social milieu of recent and contemporary Korea. Since the distant past (in the Shilla period, 669 – 935) until the present, marriages in Korea have been arranged ones (jungmae), the rationale behind this practice being the Koreans' conviction that marriage was the union of two families, not of two individual persons, and that this union being of utmost importance, could not be left to the decision of young people. The purpose of marriage was (and still is) considered to be the continuation of the lineage. Because of this, a woman's role in marriage was solely that of producing a son, whose achievements would be, in a sense, his father's achievements, thus ensuring the continuation of the latter's life (Russell 1929/2009). The preference for boy offspring brought about various attitudes and practices, which would impact the Korean culture, women being entirely responsible for conceiving a son. Thus, according to De Mente (2007, 44-45), mothers of young men would judge the would-be bride's capacity of conceiving sons on the basis of a number of 13 physical features, among which "eyebrows that were straight (a masculine characteristic) and slanted downward, along with flat, smooth foreheads", "an angular face that had the profile of a goose or flea", or "rosy palms". Moreover, parents would also provide the newly wed woman with instructions on how to behave during intercourse in order to enhance the chances of bearing a male foetus.

Additionally, the success of conceiving a son was also thought to depend on the day intercourse occurred immediately after the female's period. Thus, if a woman slept with her husband during the first, third and fifth day after her menstrual period, she would have high chances of bringing a son into the world. The practice of the cauterization of a sonless woman's navel (by setting fire to a "mixture of blue salts, musk powder, and ground-up mugwort", as noted by De Mente (2017, 49), was also employed until the beginning of the 20th century in order to ensure the birth of a son in the family. This was combined with prayers and other rituals. If all these practices/efforts did not produced the desired outcome on the part of the primary wife, another solution was for a husband to take secondary wives or concubines.

One other aspect that could explain the reason for the incapacity of young brides to produce children, in general and sons, in particular, as well as the reason why most Korean newly weds lived with their parents (mainly with the groom's parents), was their very young age. At the beginning of the Joseon dynasty, the legal age for marriage was 14 years for girls and 15 for boys, but there were also cases when girls were married off earlier, especially if one of their parents suffered from a terminal disease. The custom of early marriage came into being as a result of the exploitation and abuse of women. Most of the *yangban* daughters would become mates of or court women to the crown prince at an early age, to avoid any kind of competition. The lowborn girls were hurried into early marriages to avoid being sent as a tribute to the Mongolian court (Yu 1987). Other reasons for the need to marry off one's daughter at an early age was the fear of sex and premarital childbirth, which would "bring tremendous dishonour to a family" (das Gupta and Shozhuo 1999, 622) or the scarcity of food during the famine that Korea experienced at the beginning of the 20th century. In the

last century of the Joseon dynasty, the age of the spouses was increased to 16 for girls and 20 for boys (De Mente 2017).

Korea's chief cultural orientation was shaped by Confucianism, an ideology that preached, among others, filial piety and submissiveness of women. Along this idea, a young wife's failure to produce a son was considered lack of filial piety, as she was not able to fulfil this obligation.

At the turn of the 19th century, many of the above-presented aspects pertaining to marriage started changing, as we shall see in section 4 of the paper.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The theoretical framework considered appropriate for the current study is a simplified version of *content analysis*, defined as "the process of summarizing and reporting written data – the main contents of data and their messages" (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018, 674). The goal of content analysis "is never just description; rather, the analysed content must be related to (…) factors about documents, about persons stating the content, about the intended audience, or about the times in which the content was produced" (Baker 1994, 268).

The data used by researchers in content analysis could be in the form of artefacts, visual or recorded materials, or printed material. For the current study, I have selected a sample of novels (or "content") to be analysed, which are representative for the investigated topic and which have "a clear historical time frame" (Baker 1994, 106), namely the events that occurred in the last century in Korea. These novels (or 'texts') are actually "written communicative materials which are intended to be read and understood by people other than the analysts" (Krippendorp 2004, quoted in Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018, 674). Thus, my data have been primarily extracted from novels authored by Korean or American-Korean writers, listed in chronological order: Helie Lee (1997) *Still Life with Rice,* Kyung-Sook Shin (2014) *I'll be Right There* and (2015) *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, and Nam-Joo Cho (2018) *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982.* Since content analysis is employed to test some hypothesis, "the content must be representative of some universe for which a population can be defined and a sample drawn" (Baker 1994, 268). Thus, I consider that the selected novels are relevant for the paper's topic and representative of the Korean culture of the past 100 years.

Once the sample data has been decided upon, the next step was to break down the novels into smaller units of analysis, i.e. fragments/paragraphs and to ascribe them a name. This is what Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) and Baker (1994) call *coding*, i.e. "the ascription of a category label to a piece of data, decided in advance or in response to the data that have been collected" (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018, 668). The categories obtained (according to the themes they presented) are: stages of the traditional wedding, the use of artifacts, or attitudes of in-laws towards the new bride. Within these categories, I have searched for certain non-verbal elements (codes), such as rituals, exchange or artifacts, behaviours, symbols, practices, or the dress code. Thus, in keeping with Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018, 669), the codes for the categories may subsume the non-verbal elements, "thereby creating a hierarchy of subordination and superordination, in effect creating a tree diagram of codes". In our case, for instance, the category 'wedding stage' may include subordinate codes like rituals, gift exchange, contacting a matchmaker/fortune-teller, etc.).

The hypothesis I launched is that no matter how conservative the Korean culture had proven to be, little by little the socio-economic and political background of the last century reshaped the mentality of the people and, hence, their attitude related to marriage. Derived from this, the analysis is aimed to provide answers for the following research questions:

1) To what extent has the colonization of the Korean peninsula by the Japanese contributed to the modernization/Westernization of the country and, hence, led to new wedding rituals?

2) Has the modernization of the Koreans also been enabled by a possible diminishing of the influence of the Confucian ideology?

3) Did Christianity contribute in any way to Koreans' attitude towards marriage rituals/practices?

4) To what extent has the mass employment of women in the industrial sector impacted their attitude to marriage and family?

The analysis will be divided into three parts, each of them corresponding to a certain period of the previous century, i.e. the beginning of the century, the period after the Korean War, and the turn of the 20th century.

4. CHANGES IN THE MARRIAGE PATTERNS OF THE KOREANS IN THE PAST 100 YEARS

This section of the paper is dedicated to highlighting the changes that occurred in the last century in the marriage institution in the Korean society, by exploiting fragments from the afore-mentioned literary pieces, as well as secondary data. In keeping with Jeong (2011, 6), I consider that literary works are "cultural products of particular socio-cultural circumstances inextricably linked to history". Thus, the events that occurred in the last century in Korea provide the backdrop against which the changes in the marriage institution could be presented.

4.1. First Decades of the 20th Century

As Kendall (1996, 3) put it, "[m]arriage has been an abiding Korean preoccupation" due to the fact that it provides a measure of both self and status. For this reason, of utmost importance was the finding of the right partner. To this aim, in the 1920s, the Koreans made extensive use of matchmakers (*jungmae-in*), who would sometimes ask for extremely high prices. This was the first stage in the marriage process. In Lee's (1997) biographical novel, when the heroine's (Hongyong) Older Brother reached the age for marriage, their father paid dearly a matchmaker to find him a wife. Matchmakers "were usually older women who had a large network of contacts within a particular social circle" (Tudor 2012, 311). Their task was to search for a suitable wife, possibly from the same social class like the groom, in close or distant villages, making sure that they do not come from the same lineage. They would usually describe the possible spouse in bright colours, in order to be paid handsomely, but quite often reality proved the opposite, as it happened in the case of Hongyong's Older Brother.

> (1) "You are a very lucky boy." The matchmaker winked. "I have found the most beautiful bride for you right here in our province. Hips so wide[1], she will give you many offspring." (Lee 1997, 49)

Despite the fact that Koreans expected the matchmaker's description of the candidate to be a bit fake, Older Brother's wife was far from being "the most beautiful", as was revealed when the groom brought her to his home[2]:

> (2) "The bride was not a 'beautiful' woman as the matchmaker had bragged (…). But the creature that walked into our home that evening was less than desirable, even for the most desperate man. Her features were far from soft and refined, and her lips were dark and full. She had intensely large round eyes that slightly popped out of their sockets, and she walked with a slight limp." (Lee 1997, 50-51)

A further step (the second stage) was looking for a fortune-teller, whose task was to figure out, on the basis of knowledge about the groom's and the bride's *saju* "four pillars" (the year, month, day, and hour of their birth), if they are compatible, as the fragment below, also extracted from Lee (1997), illustrates:

> (3) "The fortune-teller pulled out his chart of stars and planets and examined the horoscope of the groom and his bride based on the couple's birth times, days, months, and years. 'A good wedding', he announced eagerly, knowing he would receive a handsome fee. 'The marriage is well matched'." (Lee 1997, 50)

What the fortune-teller does is to calculate the couple's 'harmony quotient' (*kunghap*) and in case this is low, the marriage is called off and a new search for a suitable spouse would begin. If the *kunghap* was reasonably high, the fortune-teller's next task was to calculate the date for the wedding (*napchae*). Once the wedding date was decided upon, all the other details concerning the event were focused on, such as the preparation of gifts for the bride's family (jewelry and fabric), inviting the

guests (if the wedding occurred in a *yangban* family), and deciding on the dishes to be served. It was the task of the groom's family to prepare a sedan chair in which the future bride would be brought to the groom's house.

An important stage before the wedding was the couple's preparation for adulthood. "To mark this, men would bound up their childhood pigtail into a topknot, while brides would twist their hair into a chignon at the nape of their neck" (Kendall 1996, 7). In Lee's (1997) novel, Older Brother did this three days before the bride was to arrive at his parents' home, while Hongyong changed her hairstyle on her wedding day.

(4) "Then he unwound his hair, combed and oiled it. To signify his adulthood, he coiled a topknot like Father's on his head. (…) 'They combed a straight furrow across the center of my hair, then coiled the single braid at the base of my head, securing it with a long pin worn only by married women. (…) My scalp throbbed with pain, but I had long learned to endure discomfort."[3] (Lee 1997, 62)

For men, becoming an adult was celebrated with a banquet, where relatives and friends were invited. At the same time, as an adult, the character in the novel mentioned above also received a new name, his childhood one not being used again. The future groom would leave the party to go with his Father to the shrine of the ancestors, where he would pay his respects by bowing. Accompanied by his friends, the groom would then depart to his bride's house.

A traditional custom in the past (as well as in the present) was the so-called 'selling of the *hahm*', a wooden box containing all kinds of gifts for the bride's parents. One of the groom's friends, usually the strongest, would be made responsible for acting as a horse and carrying the box to the bride's home. Once at the destination, they have the chance of getting some money by 'selling the *hahm*' to the family. The *hahm* Hongyong's family received before her wedding contained "bundles of blue, red, and green silk"[4] (Lee 1997, 60), as well as a pair of carved wooden wild ducks, considered by the Koreans the symbol of everlasting love and devotion. It was believed that ducks mate for a lifetime and if one of them happens to die, its partner would starve itself to death. In the old days, real ducks were offered, but in modern Korea these have been replaced by wooden ones.

An important part of the wedding ritual is the adornment of the bride. In the 1920s, brides had two options: either to wear the ceremonial *wonsam*[5] gown that was used by the upper class (but came to be popular among the commoners, too) or the *hanbok*[6], which skilled mothers would make for their daughters. Hongyong's mother preferred the latter, trying to make the most beautiful one for her daughter's wedding ceremony:

(5) "Let the commoners wear the *wonsam* if they please, but as your father's daughter, you will wear an elegant blue silk *hanbok*. (…) With expert skill, Mother perfectly blended and cut the dress. The *chogori*, a short jacket that fell just below the breasts, was sewn from a fine sky blue and yellow silk, as she promised. It tied at the bottom of the starched white V-neck collar with a pair of long wide ribbons. (…) The *chima*, a full-length puffy skirt was made of magnificent red silk. Underneath the skirt, I wore a five-layer knee-length slip to give it fullness. Under the slip I wore a white unlined see-through jacket and pantaloons. So securely were they wrapped, I barely had room to breathe. (…) On my feet I wore padded socks with upturned toes and colorful rubber *komushin*[7] slippers. (…) Upon my head a bridal crown was placed, a short veil that graced the tops of my shoulders and had wildflowers arranged in my hair. (…) To my surprise, Mother presented me with the red tassel ornament (….) and fastened it to my jacket strings. 'With this tassel you carry the hope of ten generations of women'." (Lee 1997, 62-63)

Another custom that was also meant to increase the groom's friends' fortune and mood at the beginning of the 20th century was that of beating the groom's soles before the wedding, as the fragment related to Hongyong's wedding reveals:

(6) "My groom arrived on his mule just before noon. During the earlier part of the day the soles of his feet received a beating from his friends, who tied his two legs together and hung him from a beam of the house to make him promise them another feast." (Lee 1997, 64)

When the groom escaped this kind of treatment, he would be directed to the bride's home, where he would meet his bride. In traditional Korea, the bride and groom would meet for the first time on their wedding day, each of them waiting anxiously to see the person they would share their lives

with. The wedding ceremony (the most important stage in the marriage process), known as *kunbere,* takes place at the bride's home and starts with the bride and groom bowing to each other. The fragment below, also excerpted from the same novel, describes the first meeting between Hongyong and her betrothed, Dukpil:

> (7) "I walked in with my elbows out and my palms raised to meet my bowed forehead, completely dependent on First Wife and an elderly female servant to guide me, for my sight was obstructed. I saw only my rubber slippers scooting, one tiny step at a time, careful not to trip over the hem. Laughter tinkled throughout the room. In spite of all teasing, I easily kept my face tight against any hint of a grin or smile[8]. A light hand pressed gently on my shoulder, directing me to sit. My groom sat across from me (…) only a whisper away. How I wanted to raise my eyes, to gaze at this newcomer full in the face, but tradition forbade it." (Lee 1997, 64)

Once the ceremony was over, the newly-weds were expected to consummate their marriage. In most of the cases, the brides were clueless regarding the act, as sex was a taboo topic in the Korean culture, and very often, due to the young age of the grooms, they were also pretty clumsy on this special night. As it emerges from Lee's novel, it was customary of the wedding guests to peep through holes they punched in the paper door of the room where the married couple would spend their first night together, in order to watch the newly-weds. But, as De Mente (2017, 605) mentioned, once the couple started undressing, the groom would extinguish the candle, preventing the peepers to see anything.

After the wedding, the bride would be carried to the groom's house in a sedan chair, the groom himself riding along on a mule or horse, depending on his family's affluence. The married couple would take with them the dowry the bride's family produced for their daughter's in-laws. The bigger the dowry and the more expensive the presents, the more chances for the new bride to be treated well by her in-laws, considering the "bitterness and cruelty (…) handed down from the older generation of women to the next" (Lee 1997, 68).

At the groom's parents' house, his family members would organize another ceremony, called *pyebaek* (the last stage of the marriage process), which implies paying respect to all the groom's relatives. Honyong, the heroine in Lee's novel describes this stage as follows:

> (8) "I bowed slowly in front of my new in-laws. Cross-legged all the way down, down until my rear touched the floor, then my forehead; a skill which required weeks of practice to accustom my legs to the strain. He bowed next to me. His legs were pressed together into a kneel, as the back of both palms met his forehead and he then descended to the ground in the same but less strenuous fashion. Up and down we went till every last elder received their tribute. And when that was complete, we faced each other and performed our final bow. (…) Afterwards, I sat before my in-laws as they tossed jujubes, red dates, and chestnuts into my skirt[9]. The more I caught, the more children and luck I would bear." (Lee 1997, 71-72)

Immediately after the *pyebaek,* the new bride had to take over the wifely duties. She becomes part of her husband's family, contact with her own parents and siblings being quite reduced.

4.2. The Japanese Colonial Era and the Period Following It

During the Japanese occupation, many *yangban* young children also got the chance of studying in Japan or in other foreign countries, where they came in touch with Western values and habits. As a consequence, these young Koreans "gained freedom and courage to make their own families, transgressing the traditional boundaries of obligations to one's parents and ancestors" (Jeong 2011, 27). At the same time, a 'wind of change' could be felt, in the sense that the new realities "forced women into the public sphere and greater contact with men (…): more girls attended coeducational schools, more women worked" (Yu 1987, 35). After the liberation from the Japanese colonizers in 1945, the new realities offered men and women more opportunities to meet possible partners. In the early 1950s, despite the fact that the traditional patriarchal relations continued to be present in Korea, we witness new ways of choosing one's spouse: instead of agreeing to a match-made marriage, people started choosing their own marriage partners. In this period we come across Western-style courtship and romance. According to Elfving-Hwang (2010, 38), some Korean writers

of the time considered that "the idea that romantic love should be a precondition to any successful marriage", but conservative Koreans would regard such a thing as revolutionary. Added to the above-mentioned facts is also the rising number of Koreans who embraced Christianity as their religion.

In Lee's (1997) novel, while Hongyong and her 3-year younger husband, Dukpil enjoyed a traditional marriage, their daughter, Dukwah married her boyfriend, Jaehak, in Western style. The two met at a college party after Dukwah finished university studies. Jaehak was a soldier who had just returned from America and boasted American looks (his hair was styled à la Elvis Presley) and manners (he would let girls enter first the coffee shop, he would pull the chairs for them). Jaehak sends a note to Dukwah, asking her to see him, but the latter does not comply with his request, so the young man has no other choice but to wait for her in front of the university where she was studying. He took her to lunch at the American military commissary in Yongsam. From that moment on, their love started flourishing.

(9) "Without realizing it, they had stolen each other's heart. They sat for a long time in silence, their hands so near they almost touched. For three months they met secretly behind my back. It was difficult for them to get together, for old tradition still held. Young couples, no matter how modern or rebellious they thought they were, must maintain a distance in public. Those days it was considered forward for a man and a woman to clasp hands together openly. So the day he dared take her hand into his, he asked her to marry him. She felt his heart beat through his palm and knew he could feel hers." (Lee 1997, 299)

What the fragment above shows is that within a time span of about 25 years, institutionalized education offered young people the chance to meet and to fall in love, eventually deciding to marry. Moreover, marriage is founded on mutual feelings, and not on family interests, the young people taking time to develop them before marriage. Still, the couples needed to abide to a certain social haptic principle: no touching in public!

Despite being an open-minded woman, who had enjoyed a happy marriage, Hongyong would not agree to her daughter's (Dukwah) choice for a husband (Jaehak) on religious grounds: the boy came from a Buddhist family, while the Lees had converted to Christianity. On the other hand, she is also dissatisfied with her future son-in-law's job: she aspired for something better for her daughter, as women were supposed to marry up.

(10) "Hongyong: 'I will find someone more suitable, perhaps a doctor. Forget about this soldier. What kind of person picks up his own bride? I was married by a matchmaker. It is the only way one can be sure about his background and bloodline. What if his lineage of Lees crosses your father's ancestors? He may be a distant cousin and your children would be born retarded. With a matchmaker such a tragic mistake would be avoided.'

Dukwah*:* 'Mother, these are different times. Many young people select their own mates.'

Hongyong: 'What you want to do is unethical. Marriage is a family matter. It's too important to decide on one's own'." (Lee 1997, 300)

The fragment very nicely highlights the difference between the older and the younger generations' concept of marriage. The 1960s were radical times. The young people did as they pleased, defying their parents' orders. The marriage tradition seems to have be entirely broken when Jaehak, the groom-to-be, showed up at his future bride's house alone, without an elder, a relative, or a go-between to ask for her hand in marriage.

As opposed to her parents' wedding, Dukwah's was a modern one, modelled after the Western ceremony, with western clothes (white bridal dress for the bride and dark suit for the groom) and rituals (walking down the aisle, bride carrying a bouquet). Her mother, who had adopted Christianity, insisted that at least it should be a Christian wedding performed by a reverend. Hongyong also made a step towards modernity by ordering a special bouquet for her daughter. The excerpt below shows how quickly the Koreans embraced the Western model of wedding ceremony.

(11) "Dukwah (…) stood very still and stiff in her white silk gown. (…) The benches were full of guests (…). Jaehak walked up the central aisle. Without a doubt he stood out, tall and confident next to his stout

friends. As he took his place up front, loud, clear foreign music announced the bride's entrance. She came in on the arm of a male relative. (…) Her face was half-hidden behind a thin white veil." (Lee 1997, 302-303)

By comparing Hongyong's marriage to her daughter's, we can identify striking differences: the mother met her husband on her wedding day, Dukwah enjoyed a period of romantic courtship before she married Jaehak; Hongyong wore a hanbok, Dukwah wore the Western white robe with the veil. Mother married at her parents' home, her daughter married in church. Some of the stages in the traditional marriage (the matchmaking – *eui hon*, the setting of the wedding date by the fortune teller, as well as the post-wedding rituals – *pyebaek*) seem to be missing in Dukwah's case.

4.3. Modern Korea

In the last decades of the 20th century South Korea witnessed an exodus of people from the countryside to the city, for better job opportunities and for education. Many teen-aged girls looked for jobs in factories in order to be able to support their brothers' education and also to send money to their parents (see Shin's 2015 novel). Daughters of affluent families, on the other hand, enrolled in universities programs in larger numbers than ever, where they came in touch with male peers every day and where they were exposed to Western visiting professors. They started imagining that they could enjoy the same rights as Western women: to marry for love, to have successful careers, and to juggle with household responsibilities. Unfortunately, the reality they were confronted with after graduating from university was a different one, in that the social structures did not encourage or support their dreams either at home or in the workplace. Few of them, who dared dream big, had to make sacrifices, which frequently led to psychological problems, as was the case of Kim Jiyoung, the heroine in Cho's (2018) novel. Her trauma is caused by the fact that women "are expected to be willing to sacrifice a large portion of their own desires and liberties for their husband's and children's benefit" (Irigaray 1994, quoted in Elfving-Hwang 2010, 70).

The socio-cultural situation in the last decades of the 20th century and the first part of the 21st century, characterized by increased affluence of the Koreans, their focus on education, as well as a wider opening to the foreign cultural influences led to the restructuring of the institutions of family and marriage. Despite the more numerous opportunities for men and women to meet and start a relationship, both sexes avoid getting seriously involved and postpone getting married until they consider they have reached a certain financial and professional status. But this does not mean that they are denied the right to express their emotions or to receive love, as it was customary in the previous two periods.

The new socio-cultural era made women more daring in expressing their feelings towards men. While until mid-20th century, a show of emotion on behalf of women would have been unimaginable, emulating their Western peers, many modern Korean women tend to feel less bound by the patriarchal rules and try to live a new life. Examples of such women would be Seungyeon, a female character in Cho's *Kim Jiyoung. Born 1982*, who, as a college student, dared confess her feelings to Daehyun, the young man that eventually marries Jiyoung.

While in the first half of the previous century, husbands very rarely touched their wives (apart from the moments when they poured their rage on them or to satisfy their sexual needs), in modern Korea men and women, even outside marriage, show more haptic behaviour, like kissing, embracing or holding hands, as the following excerpts from Shin's (2014) novel reveal:

(12) "'Can I kiss you?' Dahn asked. I didn't say anything. Dahn's lips hesitantly brushed my cheek, my forehead. After a moment, he brought his lips to mine. They were warm and sweet. (…) Myungush put his hand around my wrist and pulled me toward him; I let him put his arms around me. He pulled my hand down his crotch and said, 'You can have this, too'." (Shin 2014, 32)

The lifestyle of the Koreans is characterized by extremely busy lives. Consequently, they have less time for socializing and knowing someone better. Thus, a new way of making the acquaintance of a possible match/partner is the blind date (*soggaeting*). The traditional matchmakers are now replaced by mutual friends, who introduce the two, usually in a café. In the beginning, the four

persons will engage in small talk, but after a while, the "matchmakers" leave the newly introduced young persons on their own, hoping that things will work out between them.

Also because of the factors mentioned previously, the average age of marriage has also increased steadily. While in the 1990s, women would marry after graduating form the university (at about age 25), in 2009 the age has risen to 28.9 years for women and 31.6 years for men (according to Statistics Korea 2021). An explanation for this tendency could be the fact that women in modern Korea try to build a career, to travel around the world and to enjoy life before they tie the knot. This also seems to be convenient for men, who nowadays are not content only with an obedient and submissive wife, but also look for one who could contribute financially to the household (Tudor, 2012). While highly educated women were ideal cases in the early 1990s, nowadays they are expected to be partners of equally educated men.

In keeping with the other changes in the country, the wedding traditions have also changed. Nowadays, the majority of couples prefer the Western style wedding, with a religious ceremony followed by a party organized in a wedding hall or a hotel banquet hall. The guests are supposed to offer envelopes with money, the sum depending on the closeness of the relationship to the married couple. Usually, these envelopes are handed to the groom's or the bride's friends who invite the guests to sign a book of congratulations for the wedded couple. During the main part of the wedding, the couple usually wears Western-style wedding clothes (the white wedding dress being recognized as a symbol of weddings by Koreans, too), which they later change with traditional *hanboks* for the *pyebaek*. Whereas in the previous two periods discussed in the paper the young couple had to pay their respects only to the groom's parents, in current Korea, due to a growing spirit of equality, both pairs of parents receive the bows of respect.

A tradition that has been preserved but is less common than in the first half of the previous century is the 'selling of the *hahm*' (Tudor 2012). As most families live in apartment blocks, the custom could disturb the neighbours, as it is pretty noisy. But even this custom has been altered: rather than offering money to the groomsmen who carry the *hahm*, the bride's mother offers them lots of food and drinks.

As Korea has become one of the richest countries in the world, it is not wonder that the presents offered by the parents to the newly weds are also extremely expensive. Thus,

> "[t]he groom's family is supposed to provide an apartment for the couple, while the bride's family is supposed to fill it with furniture, appliances, and so on. The bride must in turn give the groom's family a gift, or *yedan*, which consists of valuables up to the tune of 10 percent of the cost of the apartment!" (Tudor 2016, part 1, chap. 5)

Thus, the traditional extended family is slowly being replaced by the nuclear one, which also leads (together with the long working hours of the Koreans) to the loosening of the family ties. In this respect, an advantage for the Korean women is that they do not have to submit to the demands of their in-laws and slave for them.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The changes in 20th century Korea could be accounted for in terms of the general process of modernization or Westernization of the country, "*filtered* through Japan. (…) Korea began its experience of modernity in earnest during the nation's colonization by neighboring Japan, the only Asian nation to modernize/Westernize itself successfully at the time" (Jeong 2011,16). Thus, the Japanese assimilation of Korea, though a bleak period in the country's history, has enabled women to participate in the process of education and later in the work-force, a situation that made it possible for them to leave the confines of their parents' home and mingle with young men, thus having the possibility of choosing their own marriage partners, even if this choice was not always based on love but interest. This freedom of choosing your own marriage partner also brought with it a simplification of the marriage rituals and customs. Thus, if at the beginning of the 20th century, a traditional wedding was performed in about five stages (matchmaking, setting the wedding date on

the bases of the couple's 'four pillars', the betrothal gifts, the wedding ceremony proper (*kunbere*) and the post-wedding rituals (*pyebak*)), in time, some of them have been dismissed (the matchmaking and the setting of the date by a fortune-teller). (RQ1)

On the other hand, the spread of Christianity among the Korean people somewhat shattered the Confucian principles, according to which women had to obey their father, their husband, and later in life, their son and to be submissive to their parents, parents-in-law, and husbands. Christianity encouraged, to a certain extent, gender equality. At the same time, it also contributed to the changing wedding ceremony: while in the first decades of the 20th century Koreans would have the *kunbere* in the bride's house, nowadays the wedding ceremony is performed in church, with the bride and groom wearing Western clothes (not the traditional *hanbok*), after which the wedding party takes place in a hotel's reception room. Apart from that, Christianity also contributed to the changing attitudes of the Koreans towards marriage, family life, and gender roles. (RQs 2 & 3)

As the analysis has shown, despite some changes that have taken in the Korean society, some of the old marriage patterns are still encountered nowadays. Thus, according to *Korea Newsreview 1991* (cited in Hurh 1998, 84), in the 1990s "almost three-quarters (72%) of marriages in Korea are arranged by parents, relatives, or match-makers". Moreover, some of the traditional wedding customs, such as the *selling of hahm* or the *beating of the groom's feet* are still preserved, but they are more meant for amusement. There is, nevertheless, a difference regarding the latter custom: while at the beginning of the 20th century the ritual was performed before the wedding ceremony by the groom's friends in order to get another feast from him, in modern times it is performed after the wedding ceremony.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research study was supported by the 2020 Korean Studies Grant Program of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2020-R47).

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ENDNOTES

[1] One of the many Korean women's attributes which would be indicative of their potential to give birth to sons was the large size of the hips. Such a characteristic was considered to be more important than their beauty.

[2] At the beginning of the 20th century, Korea was still a patriarchal, patrilocal society.

[3] Worth mentioning is the fact that before marriage, both young men and women in traditional Korea used to have long hair arranged in a plait/braid hanging on the back. Once they got married, each gender adopted a different hairdo.

[4] These colours have specific symbolism in the Korean culture: green represents a fresh start, red is the symbol of femininity (yin), and blue is the symbol of masculinity (yang).

[5] *Wonsam* refers to the female ceremonial topcoat of the Korean *hanbok*.

[6] *Hanbok* stands for the traditional Korean clothing

[7] *Komushin* are up-turned boat-shaped rubber shoes resembling the traditional Korean shoes. They were worn starting with the beginning of the 20th century, replacing the shoes made of straw.

[8] As shown in the novel, the Koreans held a superstition related to a girl's laughter on her wedding day. If she could not control her laughter caused by relatives' and neighbours' teasing during the 7 days of celebration, the bride was doomed to bear only daughters, and, as such, 'was no better than a servant' (Lee 1997, 64).

[9] The Koreans believe that the jujubes indicate the birth of daughters, while the chestnuts that of sons.