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The Wedding Banquet Revisited: “Contract Marriages” Between Korean Gays and Lesbians

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Abstract

This paper examines how Korean gays and lesbians negotiate South Korea’s heteronormative system anchored in the heterosexual and patriarchal family through marriages of convenience (“contract marriages”). Korean gays and lesbians pursue contract marriages in order to fulfill their filial duties to marry, while maintaining their gay and lesbian lifestyles. Yet, in pursuing contract marriages as individuals but in the service of conforming to the family, they both reinscribe and transform the heteronormative values of marriage, family, and children. They also challenge the Westernized model of the “out and proud” gay or lesbian. [Keywords: South Korea, gays and lesbians, neoliberalism, queer globalization, contract marriage, same-sex marriage, alternative families]

In the early 1990s, cinemagoers met a new crop of Asian gay films aimed at a mainstream audience. Known as "Asian Queer Cinema," films such as *Okoge* (1992) from Japan, *The Wedding Banquet* (1993)¹ from Taiwan, and *Broken Branches* (1994) from South Korea, portrayed the common pressures faced by Asian gays and lesbians to marry. As film critic Chris Berry argues, in contrast to the "dominant Anglo-Saxon post-Stonewall tropes that construct gay identity as something that involves 'coming out' of the blood family and joining other, alternative communities," these Asian films represent gayness as a family problem (2001:213). In other words, gayness, as a sexual and social identity, is seen to interfere "with the ability to perform one's role in the family" (Berry 2001:215), thus becoming a family matter.

This paper examines "marriages of convenience" [or "contract marriages" (*kyeyak kyôlhon*) as they are called in South Korea] between Korean gays and lesbians. On the one hand, these marriages would seem to confirm the stereotype of a conservative Asian culture in which homosexual identity is subsumed and erased by the heterosexual family. However, contract marriages, I argue, disclose not principally the "closeted" nature of Korean gay men and lesbians, but their efforts to negotiate South Korea's heteronormative system anchored in the patriarchal family. Such arrangements deflect the pressure to marry, but paradoxically only by conforming to it. In so doing, they expose the couple to other risks—including the gendered subordination of the female partner, and the co-optation of the gay and lesbian couple into the heteronormative institution of marriage with its class and material capital conflicts.² In trying to be gay and lesbian without exiting the family, contract marriage couples also challenge the Westernized model of the "out and proud" gay man and lesbian.

On the other hand, contract marriages also illuminate the tensions and contradictions within neo/liberal³ transformations in South Korea where "individual" and "family" (along with "company" and "nation") compete to be the basic units of society. As Jesook Song (2006) argues, particularly after the Asian financial crisis in 1997, South Korea's late-developmental state had to fundamentally restructure itself along neoliberal lines in order to integrate itself into the global capitalist economy. Nonetheless, the restructuring produced its own contradictions, not the least of which was the tension between the older collectivity of the family and the newer ideal of the entrepreneurial individual, embodied in the venture capitalist. While the former (especially as metonym for nation) was seen to be in danger of collapse during the crisis and, therefore, needed to be propped up, the latter

was seen as necessary to move South Korea from an exhausted late-developmental model of capitalism to a neoliberal one, fueled by individual energy, enterprise, and desires. Thus both “family” and “individual” came to compete as fundamental units of society.

In turn, these political-economic transformations fueled the dramatic growth of the Korean gay and lesbian community (Cho 2003). In a perverse way, as Lisa Rofel argues in the Chinese context, Korean gays and lesbians “could view themselves as at the forefront of a universal humanity in the expression of their desires” (2007:24).⁴ While political liberalization created the conditions for the emergence of a gay and lesbian movement, economic liberalization in all facets of society intensified the flows of culture, including gay culture. Modern gay bars, dance-clubs, and bathhouses sprung up almost overnight in Seoul and other parts of South Korea (Cho 2003). Nonetheless, despite the vibrancy of the Korean gay and lesbian culture, much of it remains hidden from the general public. As Suh Dong Jin, a former Korean gay activist, asserts, one of the key characteristics of Korean gays and lesbians is their close emotional bond with their families. The “anxiety and stress that would result from the breaking of their familial bond” not only make it difficult for Korean gays and lesbians to come out, they also impede the building of a gay and lesbian movement (Suh 2001:77). “As a result of this psychological barrier, the Korean homosexual movement, unable to demand specific public activities from its members, must limit itself to private activities within the lesbian and gay communities,” states Suh (2001:77).

In examining the experiences of three contract marriage couples, who are either married or planning to marry, I ask: How do they negotiate the conditions of a contract marriage? What are the consequences of their negotiations? What kind of tensions and contradictions are inherent in contract marriages, which are ostensibly carried out by gay and lesbian *individuals*, but in the service of conforming to the *family*? In answering these questions, this paper both draws upon and contributes to two bodies of literatures.

First, it contributes to the emerging field of gay globalization studies, especially the literature on “Gay Asia” (Berry et al. 2003, Jackson and Sullivan 2001, Wieringa et al. 2007). In recent years, a number of scholars (Boellstorff 2005, 2007; Manalasan 1995, 2003; Rofel 2007; Sinnott 2004; Wilson 2004) have noted the emergence of erotic cultures and sexual movements around the world “whose political rhetoric and tactics seemed to mimic or reproduce Euro-American forms of sexual identity,

subjectivity, and citizenship and, at the same time, to challenge fundamental Western notions of the erotic, the individual, and the universal rights attached to this fictive 'subject'" (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999:439). Rejecting a developmentalist model of gay globalization, which views these emergent erotic cultures and sexual movements as a form of Westernization that would ultimately result in the emergence of the "global gay" (Adam et al. 1999)—or what I facetiously term the "McGay"—anthropologists have asked how these newly-emergent erotic cultures and sexual movements in postcolonial Asian countries draw upon different histories, practices, and metaphors. For instance, Tom Boellstorff (1999) problematizes the metaphor of the "closet" in characterizing the sexuality of his "gay" Indonesian subjects, while Martin Manalansan (1995) questions "coming out" as the primary basis of gay and lesbian politics. This paper builds upon this literature insofar as it recognizes the Korean gay culture as emerging out of a conjuncture of local and global forces, including South Korea's democratization and global capitalism (i.e. transnational mobility of people, media, commodities, discourses, etc.). However, it also contributes to this literature in trying to provide a nuanced examination of how Korean gays and lesbians negotiate with these forces in classed and gendered ways, thus opening a dialogue of what it means to be "gay" in a globalizing world.

This paper also contributes to the recent debates around same-sex marriage in the West and family in South Korea. In the United States, the ruling by the Massachusetts Supreme Court in November 2003, which gave same-sex couples equal marriage rights, has sparked heated debates about same-sex marriage (Boellstorff 2007, Butler 2002, Warner 1999). So how is it that a certain segment of the Korean gay and lesbian population is bucking this international trend and engaging in contract marriages, and with what consequences? A number of factors, meanwhile, has contributed to making "family" a contentious issue in South Korea including: 1) plummeting marriage rates and spiking divorces after the IMF Crisis that have prompted the Korean government to pass the "National Family Act" in 2003 for the "purpose of the maintenance and development of healthy families" (Yang 2002); 2) the abolishment of the family-head (*hoju*) system in 2005, which had legalized the patrilineal succession of the family and family register; and 3) the low fertility and aging population of Korean society, seen as grave threats to national security (Uhn 2005), which have pushed the government to pursue various measures to

boost the population, including encouraging female marriage migrants from countries such as Vietnam, Philippines, and China (Kim 2007). Along with the phenomenon of “wild geese families” (*gireogi gajok*), where the mothers of middle-class families and their children go abroad for the children’s education while the fathers stay behind to send money, the “multicultural families” being formed by marriage migrants reveal “the changing dynamics of Korean families in globalization” (Uhn 2005:8). Even though gay and lesbians are at the forefront of many of these changes, both in terms of their lifestyle and activism, there has been almost no examination of the effect of these changes in the family system on gay and lesbian populations in South Korea, and vice-versa.

The data for this paper was gathered during field research in Seoul, South Korea in 2005 and 2006. As such, it lacks the temporal depth of a full ethnography. The couples, mostly young urban professionals in their thirties, were introduced to me by Paula, a Korean lesbian whom I had known since 1995. When I first met Paula, she had a boyfriend of four years whom she planned to marry. After I came out to her, we became good friends and started hanging out in gay and lesbian bars. She eventually developed a wide social network of lesbian and gay friends, and became a lesbian. Now, at 36, she was preparing to marry Tae Hoon, a Korean gay man her age.

“Contract marriages” are very different from the more common practice in South Korea where gays and lesbians marry heterosexual partners without revealing their sexual orientation, in order to “pass” as straight.⁵ However, they are not new. Han Chae Yoon, an activist and editor of *Buddy*, a South Korean gay and lesbian magazine, remembers reading an article in *Hitel* magazine [a gay Bulletin Board Service⁶ (BBS) newsletter] about a Korean gay and lesbian couple, now in their sixties, who had entered a contract marriage in the 1980s. The two had a “hands off” (in Korean, “*no-t’ôch’i*”) policy with regard to each other’s personal lives. One thing they did not condone, however, was “spending the night outside” (*oebak*). Meanwhile, with the growing popularity of BBS, ads began to appear on bulletin boards from gays and lesbians seeking marriage partners. Many in the gay and lesbian community condemned these gays and lesbians for trying to benefit from the privileges of heterosexuality—or, in the words of Han, trying to “have their cake and eat it too.”⁷ At the turn of the millennium, the Internet has spurred on even more contract marriages. As gays and lesbians became more aware of each other’s existence, they also pursued these arrangements in greater numbers.⁸

There are two Internet sites devoted to such arrangements in South Korea, including "Our Wedding." Our Wedding was founded in 2002 by a 34-year-old Korean gay man named Jonathan. As the only son of five children, he wanted to escape the social pressure to get married. In an email interview, Jonathan stated, "After I turned 30, all my relatives asked me when I was getting married. Especially after the marriages of my older and younger sisters, they told me it was my turn." The pressure to get married was exacerbated by his boss at the mid-sized company where he worked, who told him only half-jokingly that if he did not get married, he would not get promoted. In South Korea, both men and women, but men, in particular, need to marry in order to fulfill their filial obligations, acquire social status, and get promoted at work. Today, Our Wedding has over 150 active members, who usually meet offline once or twice a month to socialize and look for contract marriage partners. The meetings are usually held in bars, restaurants, and people's homes.

The paper is divided into three sections—"The Contract," "Trust," and "What is Fake? What is Real?" In "The Contract," I argue that contract marriages involve a "contract"—or, more often, just an implicit agreement between the contract marriage couples, regarding intimacy, children, and property. This agreement, which follows typical marriage conventions in South Korea, nonetheless, is complicated by the fact that contract marriage couples must give the appearance of a heterosexual married couple, without capitulating to all its social demands and obligations. In "Trust," I argue that contract marriages, despite their namesake, require a high level of trust in order for the couple to navigate the "spider web" of familial obligations in South Korea. Due to the patriarchal nature of contract marriages, which demand different commitments and sacrifices on the part of gays and lesbians, this trust is both highly gendered and embodied.⁹ In "What is Fake? What is Real?" I argue that contract marriages, despite their ostensibly "fictitious" nature, blur the lines between "what is real" and "what is fake" when they become animated as a *social fact*, circulating among the couple's respective families and relatives. This is especially true in relation to the contract marriage couples' affective commitments to each other. In short, contract marriages are a highly volatile and value-laden social field, in which the participants can easily get "burned" as they try to manipulate them for their own ends.

“The Contract”

Contract marriage couples marry in order to construct the façade of a heterosexual married couple. However, behind the marriage contract lies another contract or, more often, just an implicit agreement that each person will do his or her best to secure the other’s privacy, and fulfill the familial and social obligations necessary to maintain the façade.¹⁰ In May 2006, Paula¹¹ invited me to the home of a gay and lesbian couple in *Pansol*¹², a middle-class suburb of Seoul. They had gotten married the February before. When we dropped by, Jin Heon, the husband, was not home. In his apartment were Paula’s ex-girlfriend, Jenny, and Lesley washing dishes in the kitchen. Lesley was Jenny’s girlfriend and Jin Heon’s wife [see Family Chart].¹³ The apartment was small and neat with none of the accoutrements that I associated with a newlywed, such as ornately framed wedding portraits that usually hung prominently in bedrooms or living rooms. While Jenny and Lesley talked in the kitchen, Paula and I went into the study where I helped Paula with her English homework. Soon after, we heard Jin Heon come home. He was complaining about the cold, air-conditioned subway. A few minutes later, Jin Heon popped into the study to use the computer. Logging onto *Ivancity*, South Korea’s most popular gay portal, he checked his email. He had apparently received one “heart”¹⁴ from an admirer in the online gay dating site. Looking at the headless torso of the man who had sent him the heart, he snorted, “Oh, look at him, obviously good only for a one-night stand.” A “contract marriage” couple, Lesley and Jin Heon shared an apartment but slept in separate bedrooms and led autonomous intimate lives.

Later that week, I had a chance to observe a lesbian discuss the details of her contract marriage. Paula introduced me to Latte and Benan, a lesbian couple. Latte, a femme¹⁵ lesbian, was planning to marry Chang Ho, a gay man, whom she had met in “Our Wedding.” The five of us—Latte, Benan, Paula, Paula’s girlfriend, Eugene, and I—sat in a downtown coffee shop discussing Latte’s upcoming marriage. While Latte sat demurely, her butch girlfriend, Benan, did most of the talking. Latte and Chang Ho had met briefly in 2003 but did not seriously pursue contract marriage until April of this year when the pressure to marry intensified for both of them. Latte, who was 30 years old, said she faced pressure to marry since she was 25. “When my mom is even a little bit sick, she tells me it’s because I’m not married,” said Latte. “She tells me, ‘If you don’t get married, I will die.’” Once again, Latte’s relation with her mother exempli-

fied the close emotional bond between Korean gays and lesbians and their families, discussed by Suh above. Latte, Benan, and Chang Ho also typified South Korea's "weekend gays and lesbians," who spent the week leading mostly heterosexual lives, while reserving the weekends for their gay and lesbian pursuits. In their case, however, they also spent Sundays getting to know each other, in preparation for the contract marriage.

For Latte and Chang Ho, the contract marriage issues revolved mainly around the wedding reception and not having children. Both of them planned to keep the wedding simple, exchanging inexpensive sets of watches and jewelry. Latte and Chang Ho planned to avoid having children by declaring that one of them was infertile. This was in sharp contrast to Paula whose parents were already feeding her *poyak* (traditional Korean medicine) to ensure a healthy pregnancy, even though Paula also planned to invent an excuse to avoid having children. At this point, Benan asked the group whether anyone knew of an obstetrician who could forge a note certifying that the couple could not conceive. These discussions showed the emergent nature of contract marriages, which were being collectively negotiated right before my eyes. They also raise the important issue of children. In South Korea, the concept of family lineage (*tae*), which associates marriage with childbirth, makes childbirth less "an affair of an individual marriage or couple, but rather of the larger family" (Yang 2002:95). Thus, even though my informants skirted the issue of children, saying that they would "cross that bridge" when they got there, childbirth is likely to remain a key issue within contract marriages, which I am unable to address because of the limited temporal depth of this paper. Instead, talk quickly turned to the more pressing issue of living arrangements.

Unlike Lesley and Jin Heon, Latte and Chang Ho, along with their respective partners, planned to live in separate apartments, preferably in the same apartment building or complex. That way, Latte and Chang Ho could quickly run to their apartment when their parents visited. Following Korean custom, Chang Ho, the groom, was responsible for buying the apartment, and Latte, the bride, for furnishing it. In Chang Ho's case, however, his boyfriend, Han, already owned an apartment. Chang Ho thus planned to contribute \$100,000 for another apartment, where Latte and Benan could live together. Benan would supply the rest of the money—\$50,000. The question then became one of whether Benan needed Chang Ho to sign a contract stating that she had put in one-third

of the money. “Don’t do it,” Paula said. “The money is not the issue.” What, then, was the issue?

“Trust”

As Min Ho, a long-time member of the Korean gay community, observed, contract marriages involve deception on a wide scale. They typically involve deceiving anywhere from one to two hundred people—starting, of course, with one’s own parents. They also involve attending obligatory family events such as weddings, funeral rites, and holidays, which easily amount to more than ten events per year. “Think about it,” said Min Ho. “The funeral rites for the grandparents on both sides of the family already make it four times a year. Then you have the holidays including Thanksgiving and New Year’s, plus all the birthdays...”

In order to navigate what Min Ho called the “spider web” of familial and kinship obligations in South Korea, contract marriages require a high level of trust. Certainly, this trust is necessary in all intimate relationships—normative and non-normative. However, in contract marriages, it takes on particular gendered dimensions. For lesbians, it is important for ensuring that they are not over-exploited in what is, after all, a patriarchal institution. For gay men, it is important for ensuring the security of their financial investment in the marriage. In other words, contract marriages expose gays and lesbians to different areas of risk, demanding a high level of gendered trust and intimacy between the partners, belied by the term “contract marriage.”

Since Lesley and Jin Heon got married, hardly a week went by when they did not attend some sort of family gathering. Due to Jin Heon’s new status as an “adult” after his marriage, he was expected to attend these gatherings that he had previously been able to ignore. At these gatherings, Lesley, as the daughter-in-law, was expected to help out, peeling garlic, frying fish, etc. Moreover, when Jin Heon’s parents dropped by, Lesley had to cook dinner, make small talk, and then retire to her bedroom when her parents-in-law fell asleep in the living room, watching TV. These visits created tremendous stress for Lesley, who felt both resentful that she had to stay at home, and sorry that she was not a better daughter-in-law who could engage in amiable conversation (*ssak-ssak-han myônûri*). In showing the embodied nature of contract marriages, where Lesley had to perform the requisite roles of good wife and obedient daughter-in-law,

these performances highlighted contract marriages as a gendered experience, rather than simply being a “contract”—implicit or otherwise.

Making matters worse, Jin Heon’s parents already owned the keys to their apartment and often dropped by unexpectedly, creating a deep source of stress for the couple. Once in a car ride to an Our Wedding gathering in Seoul, Lesley’s girlfriend, Jenny, mimicked, for my benefit, Lesley’s life as a married woman. Putting on the deep voice of a news anchor, she intoned: “Lesley has no problems with her husband but she gets stress from her parents-in-law. Because they keep dropping by on the weekend, she has no weekend life. Because they have the keys to their apartment, she feels a sense of unease. Even the rattling of blinds in the wind makes her uneasy because it sounds like keys in the front door. It is *that* serious.” Watching Lesley have to do all these things for his parents, Jin Heon felt sorry. “When my parents tell me that they’re going to drop by, I find myself getting annoyed, then feeling guilty for getting annoyed. I ask myself, ‘Why am I going annoyed? [After all] they’re my parents.’” Due to their sense of vulnerability in the patriarchal institution of marriage, lesbians generally sought out gay men whom they could trust as their husbands, even though it was a “contract marriage.” Typically, such men were gay husbands who protected their lesbian wives from their notorious mothers-in-law. As Paula stated, “even though lesbians use the term ‘contract marriage,’ they’re looking for a partner with whom they can spend a lifetime.”

In contrast, the gay men typically sought out lesbians who could act the parts of both an attractive wife and a devoted daughter-in-law—typically femmes who, in appearance and demeanor, came across as normative women. They also sought out lesbians whom they felt that they could trust with their money since they were often the ones responsible for buying the apartment. Ironically, in Paula and Tae Hoon’s case, while the fulfillment of the first condition brought them together, conflict over the second almost broke their engagement.

When Tae Hoon met Paula at Our Wedding, he was attracted to her because she was the prettiest and most accomplished of the lesbians there. Not only did she come from a solidly middle-class family, she was also a graduate student at a prestigious university in Seoul. Like Latte, Paula had been under the gun to marry since her early to mid-twenties. In college, Paula had a boyfriend who left to do his military service. Her mother, however, still forced her to attend *matsôn* (meetings with prospect to marriage) with strangers in fancy hotel coffee shops. For her part, Paula tried every

trick in the book to avoid marriage, from declaring that she was a “confirmed bachelorette” to claiming that she had a boyfriend (by her late-twenties, Paula had broken up with her boyfriend and started exclusively dating women). In telling her parents about her girlfriends, Paula would simply change the pronoun “she” to a “he.” It was only after all these tactics had failed, and her mother told her that her father could not “shut his eyes” when he lay down to sleep, so worried was he about her future, nor could he die peacefully, not having fulfilled his obligation as a father, that she turned to *Our Wedding* as the last resort.

In turn, Paula’s parents, who had rejected Chang Ho, whom Paula had also considered marrying, because of his relatively poor background, liked Tae Hoon because of his wealthy background. They thus reproduced the heteronormative values of class and gender in Korean marriage practice, which are less individual partnerships than family alliances (Kendall 1996). Tae Hoon sought out *Our Wedding* after an aborted attempt to marry a straight woman who did not know that he was gay. For many years, Tae Hoon had led a gay lifestyle and had boyfriends. However, after his last breakup with a Korean boyfriend who had cheated on him, Tae Hoon swore off gay relationships and determined to become straight. His parents, who had been aware of his sexuality and who had even tried to “cure” him by making him visit a psychiatrist, were ecstatic. They hoped that a straight marriage would succeed where the psychiatrist had failed. They also hoped to deflect the increasingly sharp gazes of suspicion directed at their family by their relatives, as their only son remained unmarried. As a result, Tae Hoon became engaged to a pretty and educated woman, also from a wealthy family. But as the relationship progressed, Tae Hoon said that he felt “real love” from his fiancée and broke off the engagement. “One night, she was waiting for me in front of the gates of my home,” Tae Hoon said. “That’s when I knew that she loved me and I couldn’t go through with the wedding.” (In South Korea, it is uncommon for a woman to wait for a man in front of his house. Moreover, when a person does wait, it means that he or she really likes the other person as they would have to wait for hours on hand, not knowing when the other person will return home). After the failed attempt at marriage, Tae Hoon accepted the fact that he could not change his sexual orientation and sought out *Our Wedding*.

If Tae Hoon’s wealth and Paula’s beauty and education made them ideal contract marriage partners, the tensions of forging an alliance between an upper-middle-class and middle-class family almost destroyed

the engagement. In particular, Paula’s pretty, femme appearance, which had attracted Tae Hoon to her, also made him distrust her. According to Tae Hoon, many of the lesbians and gay men who came to Our Wedding had different goals. While the gay men were intent on marriage, he believed the lesbians came to drink and socialize with other lesbians. In other words, he saw them as frivolous. He attributed these different attitudes toward their sexual identities. While the gay men’s sexual identities were more set, the lesbians’ sexual identities were more fluid. This was especially true, he said, for femme lesbians like Paula—a belief that was partly justified by her personal history. According to Tae Hoon, “I feel that if you’re not butch [lesbian], you’re bisexual, at least as a Korean.” In his mind, due to Paula’s fluid sexual identity and ability to pass as a straight woman, Paula could divorce him in order to marry a straight man—a risk that he felt particularly exposed to given his wealthy background. “I’m taking a big risk,” said Tae Hoon. “If Paula wants a divorce, guess what happens? She can demand half the property.”

Tae Hoon’s gendered distrust of Paula was compounded by his class prejudice against Paula’s partner Eugene, who had dropped out of college and was currently unemployed. Initially, when Paula and Tae Hoon hatched their wedding plan, they planned to have Eugene pose as Tae Hoon’s boyfriend’s girlfriend. Like Latte and Chang Ho, Paula and Tae Hoon planned to live in two apartments in the same apartment complex. Yet, as the wedding day drew near, the relation between Paula and Tae Hoon began to fray to the point that they called off the wedding.

Notwithstanding the fact that one of the reasons that Paula pursued contract marriage was to be with her lesbian partner, in addition to fulfilling her filial duties, Tae Hoon was openly contemptuous of Eugene’s low social status. He was also worried about her sponging off Paula and, by extension, him. “Eugene is Paula’s girlfriend. She has no job. Meanwhile, Paula is a graduate student. Who’s going to support Eugene? Naturally, it’ll be me,” Tae Hoon grumbled. The wedding was only recalled when Tae Hoon’s parents showed up at Paula’s front door and ordered them to make up and get married so that Tae Hoon’s family would not “lose face” in front of their relatives from the broken engagement. The same sense of “face” that so powerfully motivated gays and lesbians to pursue contract marriages now resuscitated this one, which threatened to collapse from all its internal tensions and contradictions.

Finally, rankling Tae Hoon's nerves was the sheer cost of the wedding. When I spoke to Paula and Tae Hoon in May, they were planning to hold their wedding in July at one of the poshest hotels in downtown Seoul, with 500-800 guests, at \$65 a plate. In order to afford the \$70,000 in wedding expenses, Paula's parents had to sell one of their apartments. Tae Hoon's family, on the other hand, spent that much just for Paula's jewelry. Given the amount of money that was being poured into what was supposed to be a "fake" wedding, Tae Hoon was angry. "What was supposed a 'fake' wedding is turning into the *real* thing," he fumed.

"What is Fake? What is Real?"

Resting on the assumption that the couple's married status was just a façade, contract marriage also mystified the very real nature of the relationship, which took on a life of its own, as it became a social fact among a web of social relations. Following Emile Durkheim (1982), I use "social fact" to refer to the coercive power of cultural perception to shape social reality. In other words, as the social fact of contract marriage began to circulate and take root among the couple's family, friends, and relatives, its social reality began to overshadow its "fictitious" nature. This was particularly evident in the participants' emotional commitment to their partners.

When I first met Jin Heon in 2005, he was proudly engaging in *pŏn-seksŭ* ("lightning sex" aka "one-night stands") through *Ivancity* and did not want a boyfriend. However, when I met him again in 2006, he was seriously looking for a stable partner. He attributed his change in attitude to his new status as a "married man." Not only did he feel that it was unseemly for a "husband" to bring home guys for one-night stands, even though Lesley told him that she did not mind, he also wanted a stable relationship with a man that would mirror Lesley's own relationship with Jenny. I noticed similar changes in Tae Hoon. When I interviewed Tae Hoon, he was, at first, adamant that the contract marriage was just that—a contract. "It's a contract marriage, no matter what," he said. "Paula and I will just be friends." Yet, in the same breath, he continued, "I will be her special friend. If there's love, it'll be a special type of love. It will be love for a dear friend since we'll eventually be companions." Thus, in several abrupt sentences, Tae Hoon moved swiftly from being Paula's "friend," then a "special friend," to being her "companion."

These shifts in Tae Hoon's affective commitments to Paula illustrated for me the emotionally volatile nature of contract marriages, in which their contractual nature competes against the normative expectations of marriage. Indeed, as the coercive power of contract marriage as a social fact began to take hold, Tae Hoon's affective commitments began to evolve from declaring that the contract marriage was just a "contract," to professing the normative emotions and commitments of a future husband. In other words, as the contours of the contract marriage family began to solidify, so did their respective roles as a bona fide "husband and wife."

These changes in Tae Hoon's feelings toward Paula also gave me insight into his sudden change of heart about Eugene. At first, Tae Hoon was not particularly concerned about Eugene's low social status, viewing her as a minor player in the contract marriage arrangement. However, as his view of Paula shifted from a "friend" to a "special friend," then a "companion," Tae Hoon's view about Eugene also changed. He began to see Eugene as a serious liability who needed to be banished from the contract marriage family altogether. Indeed, in explaining his profound distaste for Eugene, Tae Hoon stated: "No matter what, Paula will be my wife. Her disadvantage will be my disadvantage. If someone no good is in Paula's life, she'll be in my life too. That's why there's no contract marriage or fake marriage." For her part, Paula tried to adapt to the pressures of being a future daughter-in-law by pretending that the contract marriage was, to a certain degree, real. "I try to think of her [mother-in-law] as my own mother," said Paula, "since if I consider it [acting like a daughter-in-law] stress, it becomes stress."

Finally, in the emotional whirlwind of contract marriage, Paula and Tae Hoon were not the only ones left reeling and confused. Eugene was also left pondering the question of "What is fake? What is real?" In particular, the contract marriage left Eugene wondering which was the *real* relationship—Paula's relationship with her, or Paula's relationship with Tae Hoon and his family. "When Paula started the contract marriage with Tae Hoon, I thought our relationship was the real one," said Eugene. "Now I'm not so sure."

When Paula embarked on what Tae Hoon termed his "wedding project," Eugene was fully supportive. As butch lesbians, neither Eugene nor Benan faced much pressure from their parents to marry. As Benan put it, "The parents see the child grow up drinking and smoking and say, 'Why don't you live with your mother?' or 'It's better if you live alone.'" If anything, the parents found it more embarrassing to send a butch daughter to another family as a daughter-in-law than to have an unwed daughter. Once

again, these “exceptions” highlight the importance of embodied performance in the construction of the Korean heteronormative order, which, like contract marriages, requires convincing performances in order to be effective. Indeed, a “soft butch” like Jenny, who usually played the role of a butch partner in a relationship but who, in appearance and demeanor, came across as a femme, still faced pressure to marry.¹⁶ Moreover, despite the fact that more young Koreans were either delaying marriage or foregoing it altogether, and the divorce rate in South Korea has become the third highest in the world (Bae 2007), this pressure to marry remained high in South Korea in 2006.¹⁷ Instead, both Eugene and Benan stood on the sidelines, supporting their femme partners as they pursued contract marriages, secure in the belief that their femme partners were pursuing contract marriages, partly in order to be with them. However, the more Eugene saw the nature of contract marriages, the less she liked them.

For one thing, contract marriages, in Eugene’s estimation, were heavily stacked against the women. “At first, I thought it [contract marriage] was ok. However, as I observed the process of contract marriage, I realized that the women had too much to lose,” said Eugene. For instance, as the wedding plans unfolded, not only did Tae Hoon call Paula three or four times a day, checking on the wedding preparations, Paula’s future mother-in-law also called her at least once every two days to have Paula attend minor social events, such as meeting her future sister-in-law’s best friend. This was in the midst of Paula having to write her final reports and exams. In contrast, Paula’s parents did not call Tae Hoon even once. These asymmetrical relationships between Tae Hoon and Stella and their respective in-laws foreshadowed a future arrangement in which Paula would be expected to move into the home of her parents-in-law and live under the watchful eye and strong thumb of her mother-in-law, in particular. Lesbians thus appeared to be more cautious than gay men in entering contract marriage due to its patriarchal nature, not because they were frivolous, as Tae Hoon implied above.

In Paula and Eugene’s case, the contract marriage also threatened to destroy the very thing that it was meant to protect—their lesbian relationship. As the wedding plans unfolded and Paula’s engagements with her future family-in-law took precedence, Eugene’s own relationship with Paula suffered. Indeed, in the newly emerging “contract marriage family,” Eugene felt she was becoming a *persona non grata*, whose presence ceased to matter because it was not a shared social fact. As the odd person out in the contract marriage family, Eugene envisioned things getting worse, not better (as

she and Paula had initially hoped), after Paula got married. This was especially true if Paula had to live with her parents-in-law. “How can she spend a night out? She’ll have to spend all her time drinking tea with her parents-in-law,” said Eugene ruefully. That, in turn, spelled bad news for their relationship, if not its end. “For Paula to become a good wife and daughter-in-law, she has to become a bad girlfriend,” said Eugene quietly.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the topic of “contract marriage” between Korean gays and lesbians. As Korean gays and lesbians face the daunting task of reconciling personal desires with familial and social pressure to marry, some have resorted to contract marriages. Such arrangements deflect the pressure to marry but, paradoxically, only by conforming to it. In so doing, they expose the couple to other risks—including the gendered subordination of the female partner, and the co-optation of the gay and lesbian couple into the heteronormative institution of marriage with its class and material capital conflicts. Indeed, as Paula, herself acknowledged, quoting a Korean proverb, in avoiding the “garbage truck” of marriage, she risked getting run over by the “dump truck” of contract marriage.¹⁸

That is perhaps not surprising. Feminists, for a long time, have argued that the social contract to make civil society and the patriarchal state involves a prior “sexual contract” or the subordination of women in marriage (Brown 1995). In other words, men emerge triumphantly out of the family and into civil society as “individuals,” only after the women are subordinated and made responsible for the emotional, sexual, and material care of the men—hence the claim of both individual and family as basic units within neo/liberalism (Brown 1995).

Contract marriages somewhat complicate this picture. First, though lesbians may provide gay men with emotional and material care, they do not have sex with them. Nor do gays and lesbians necessarily reproduce patrilineal family ties, and, by extension, the patriarchal society through the production of heirs. What they *do* do, however, is to reinforce the sanctity of the family as the proper unit of social, moral, and national belonging. And they do so at the cost of erasing the subjectivities and agency of Korean gays and lesbians as social subjects. Thus, even as Lesley and Jin Heon attempt to manipulate contract marriage for their own ends, the fact that Jin Heon’s parents already own the key to their

apartment demonstrates, practically and symbolically, the degree to which they lack “full autonomy” as gay and lesbian subjects.¹⁹

Second, though individual and family may compete as basic units of society in South Korea, that is a relatively recent phenomenon, situated in the vortex of post-Asian Crisis transformations in 1997, when the neoliberal Kim Dae Jung administration pursued contradictory reforms that valorized both the entrepreneurial individual, embodied in venture capitalists, *and* the heterosexual nuclear family, which was considered to be in danger of collapse, particularly with the mass layoff of the male heads of middle-class households (Kim and Finch 2002, Song 2006). While the first measure arose out of the calculations of neoliberal governmentality, the second involved the recoding of the metonym of “family as nation” that has persisted as a late-developmental ideology since the formation of Korean modernity (Chang 1997). Thus, in order to appreciate both the tension between these two forms of governance and their similarities and differences from Western forms of neoliberal governmentality, it is important, as Aihwa Ong (2006) recommends, to situate them within different genealogies of neoliberalism.

Instead, the negotiation of these Korean gays and lesbians challenges Western liberal ideals, based on Enlightenment conceptions of the individual, implicit in works such as *Families We Choose* (1997) by Kath Weston, where gays and lesbians are seen to be “free” to choose their own alternative families. It also parallels particular contemporary gay notions of acceptable gayness, characterized by an ethos of domesticity and consumption, evidenced in TV shows like *Will and Grace*, with its quasi couple, composed of a white gay man and a straight white female.

In particular, the privileged class contours of contract marriages raise the question of whether they are a uniquely middle or upper-middle-class phenomenon. In South Korea, the question of marriage is often moot for Korean men—gay or straight—who are poor or unemployed, as they are expected to be financially independent before they take on the role of a family breadwinner. At the same time, more research is needed on what motivates gays and lesbians to pursue contract marriages. Is it really moral obligation to family, self-interest [i.e. a sense of social respectability and promotion at work for gay men and wealth (e.g. an apartment) for lesbians], or both? Without more research, I am aware that the actions of my informants, which involve playing a trick not only on their parents but on a much larger community of extended family, friends, and colleagues, may appear not only juvenile and farcical but also morally reprehensible.

Third, in emphasizing the coercive role of the institution of family with its mutual obligations of filial piety and paternalism, I am also aware that, like the film *Wedding Banquet*, this essay risks universalizing the Orientalist notion of the all-encompassing familial obligation that confronts non-Western subjects. Family becomes *the* “culturalist” account of difference. In other words, I risk exoticizing my informants and, at the same time, downplaying the structural and affective parallels, and ruptures in their experiences vis à vis other queers in the world.²⁰

Despite these caveats, the main point of this essay—that Korean gays and lesbians are principally not closeted but negotiating the particular conditions of being gay and Korean when they marry—remains salient. When Paula says that she is engaging in contract marriage so that her father can “shut his eyes peacefully” when he sleeps/dies, it is not because she is lacking pride as a lesbian. “Of course, it’s [contract marriage] bad,” stated Paula. “In fact, it’s ridiculous that I’m hiding my life from them [her parents].” She also appreciates that a contract marriage is a less than an ideal model, where the “double happiness” of supposedly “having her cake and eating it too” can easily turn into the “double jeopardy” of “jumping from the frying pan into the fire.” Yet, despite these sharp contradictions and ambivalences, the fact that she is still willing to go through with contract marriage shows the extent to which family continues to serve as a powerful site of social, moral, and national belonging in South Korea, and the contradictions that beset Korean society as the Korean state strives to transform itself from a late-developmental state into a neo/liberal state.

CONTRACT MARRIAGE FAMILY CHART				
Femme Lesbian	+	Gay Man (Contract Marriage Couple)	Butch Lesbian Partners	Gay Partner
Lesley	+	Jin Heon	Jenny	—
Paula	+	Tae Hoon	Eugene	—
Latte	+	Chang Ho	Benan	Han

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ENDNOTES

¹The film *Wedding Banquet*, by Taiwanese director Ang Lee, from which I derive the title of this paper, is about a gay Taiwanese man in New York City who marries a straight Mainland Chinese woman in order to appear straight for his parents. Trouble starts, however, when his parents arrive in the city to attend their son’s “wedding banquet.” On the wedding night, the son ends up sleeping with the woman and impregnating her. After the son comes out to his parents, the son, the woman, and the son’s white American boyfriend, end up creating an “alternative family” to raise the child.

²By “gendered subordination,” I refer to the patriarchal nature of marriage, including contract marriage, in which the bride, in the South Korean context, is expected to fulfill the roles of “wise mother, good wife” (*hyŏnmo-yangch’ŏ*).

³Following Wendy Brown (2003), I define “neoliberalism” as the superseding of political liberalism (i.e. “freedom,” “equality” etc.) by economic liberalism (i.e. “free market”). However, I also nuance it by viewing it as a Foucauldian technology of governance (Rose 1996) and social ethos (Song 2006) that manifests itself in historically specific and geographically uneven ways (Ong 2006).

⁴As John D’Emilio discusses in his classic essay, “Capitalism and Gay Identity” (1983), there is an intimate relationship between the growth of capitalism (in particular, the growth of wage-labor and urbanization) and the emergence of modern gay identities (i.e. the ability of gays to forge identities, social networks, and lifestyles that revolve exclusively around their desire). Especially after World War II, many young American gays and lesbians took advantage of the disruptions of the two world wars to take refuge in large, anonymous cities and create thriving gay and lesbian subcultures. In South Korea, however, despite the development of capitalism, family continues to play a powerful role in structuring the lives of gays and lesbians. Thus, even if they become financially independent, they are expected to live at home until they get married. Moreover, the size of South Korea—slightly larger than the state of South Carolina in the US—makes families’ surveillance of their children’s lives that much easier and the creation of independent gay lives that much more difficult.

⁵It would not be an exaggeration to say that the majority of Korean gays and lesbians in their 40s and above are married to straight partners, who do not know that they are gay or lesbian. Meanwhile, the growing number of men, who are becoming aware of their gay sexuality *after* their marriage, is becoming a serious issue, which I address in my dissertation research.

⁶Bulletin Board Services (BBS) are precursors to the Internet with simple text-based message boards and chat features.

⁷Contract marriages are seen to weaken the gay and lesbian community by compromising the need for political action and group solidarity. As Han Chae Yoon states, "The fundamental question for gays and lesbians is whether you will live as a gay or lesbian for 24 hours, for 10 hours, or only two hours a day. Contract marriages allow gays and lesbians to lead a stable life as gays and lesbians even though they live only a couple of hours a day as gays and lesbians."

⁸Contract marriages are something that most gays and lesbians think about at least once in their lives even if most do not follow through with them. Han Chae Yoon told me how she had, herself, once jokingly suggested to a gay male activist that the two of them should get married so that she could use the money from the marriage to set up an office for gay and lesbian activism. As I discuss later, this appears to indicate that money or inheritance is one of the chief reasons for gays or lesbians to pursue contract marriages.

⁹Following Judith Butler (1990), I highlight the verb "perform" to emphasize the discursivity of sexual and gender norms, which require their constant "reiteration" through embodied performances, in order to maintain their power and efficacy.

¹⁰The term "contract" used in contract marriage partakes in the meanings of both "contract theory," which Carole Pateman (1988) argues underlies the creation of the "social contract" [i.e. "the original contract...[where] the inhabitants of the state of nature exchange the insecurities of natural freedom for equal, civil freedom which is protected by the state" (Pateman 1988: 2)], and the "sexual contract" (i.e. marriage) which, she argues, is a "repressed dimension" of contract theory. In other words, even as contract marriage couples partake in the latter (i.e. the "sexual contract") in order to create the façade of a married heterosexual couple, they still try to keep alive the spirit of the former (i.e. "contract theory" or the implicit agreement that they have made as rational actors to respect each other's intimate lives and maintain this façade for both their sake).

¹¹All the names were chosen by my informants and reflect the common custom within lesbian and gay communities of using "stage names," even with people whom one has known for a long time, in order to maintain one's anonymity.

¹²This is a fictitious name used to protect the identities of my informants.

¹³The "Contract Marriage Family Chart," presented half in jest for anthropologists, for whom kinship charts are *de rigueur*, shows the complexity of "contract marriage families," usually arranged between a gay man and a femme lesbian, and their respective partners. Even though Lesley is a "soft butch" (something I discuss below), I include her in the category of "femme lesbian" because she comes across as a normative feminine woman, both in appearance and demeanor. When thinking about contract marriages, the image of, not a "two," but a "four-legged" race comes to mind, where four people are figuratively joined at the hips. That is to say, contract marriages are difficult to navigate due to the great number of individuals involved.

¹⁴A "heart" is an icon that the dating site members send each other to signify interest.

¹⁵The terms "butch" and "femme" refer to the roles of masculinity and femininity taken up by the female partners within a lesbian relationship. As Paula explained to me, these roles are somewhat relative in that a lesbian, who normally identifies as a "butch," can take on the role of a "femme" if she meets another "butch." As far as Paula was concerned, Korean lesbians were no different from their Western counterparts. However, terms such as "soft butch," which I have heard used only by Korean lesbians, may point to some of their cultural differences.

¹⁶In fact, Lesley was also a "soft butch," making her and Jenny the rare "butch-but" couple.

¹⁷Indeed, as Min Ho told me, a Korean woman's "value" is measured by her age. A woman in her early twenties is considered to be worth her weight in gold; a woman in her mid-twenties, her weight in silver; and a woman in her late-twenties, her weight in bronze. A

woman in her thirties and above, meanwhile, is considered an “old maid”—worthless. This valuation demonstrated the strong pressure exerted by the normative timeline on women, especially to marry.

¹⁸Once again, due to the temporal shallowness of this study, I was unable to address the full complexity of these risks. For instance, it is unclear how long these couples can keep up the façade of being heterosexual without having it blow up in their faces, especially when the question of children is involved.

¹⁹Ironically, what makes contract marriages immune from public criticism is that they are viewed as a matter of “free choice” between gay and lesbian individuals. For instance, Han Chae Yoon explained how gay and lesbian organizations could not criticize contract marriages for fear of looking moralistic.

²⁰I thank Martin Manalansan for these insights and wording.

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