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Film review: Wedding through Camera Eyes: A Trilogy of Wedding Photography in Korea

Jinhee Lee

Eastern Illinois University, jl2@eiu.edu

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Wedding Through Camera Eyes: A Trilogy of Wedding Photography in Korea

>> A film by Kijung Lee. 2002. 45 minutes.

This documentary features one of the most popular and interesting cultural practices in contemporary South Korea: the making of a photo album with photographs taken before, during, and after the wedding. Through interviews with three couples and their professional photographers, the film introduces a trilogy of wedding photos, underscoring the centrality of such visual records in the rite of passage. Following a brief introduction of each couple and the filmmaker himself—a native Korean author and recent recipient of a Ph.D. in visual anthropology—the documentary unfolds the stories of the newlyweds over the pre-wedding, wedding, and honeymoon photography, evenly divided into three 15-minute segments.

Under the subtitle, “Dream on Fantasy Wedding,” the first story introduces the process of making a pre-wedding photo album, also known as “outdoor shooting.” A professional photographer leads the prospective bride and groom to a number of carefully selected locations, such as the exotic amusement park Lotte World and a traditional palace ground, to create romantic images of the couple through photography. When interviewed at their new home, with an enlarged pre-wedding photo hung on the wall, the groom explains his motive and satisfaction in making the pre-wedding album which gave him the opportu-



The film suggests that the particular manners in which such popular and highly commercialized wedding photography is practiced can reveal certain social values and ideas that are embedded in contemporary South Korean culture.



PHOTO COURTESY OF KIJUNG LEE

Filmmaker Kijung Lee

efforts to follow the carefully staged poses and expressions for the photographer, the one-day hero and heroine change their costumes several times throughout the photo-shoot from Western style ceremonial clothing to *hanbok*, traditional Korean clothing.

The second segment, “Wedding as a Rite of Passage,” takes place in a commercial wedding hall. It begins with an introduction of the chronological order of the Western style wedding ritual, and moves on to talk with the bride and groom about the elaborate photographing practice during and after the ceremony. Their comments on the

nity to make his dream come true when he held his bride in her wedding dress for the camera. An interview with the photographer follows, elaborating on the meticulous skill and technique required to create these permanent images of the couple through photography. While making their best

photos from their traditional Korean ceremonial greeting, or *pyebaek*, which consists of the last part of the wedding hall’s ritual package, are particularly interesting: the bride recollects her feelings of unfamiliarity toward the “traditional” Korean ceremony not knowing much about the meanings of the detailed practice, while the groom tries but keeps failing to identify some of his extended family members in the photos who were receiving his traditional bow according to their age and genealogical ranks. The bride also recalls that her family was not allowed to participate in the traditional bowing due to the opposition from a wedding hall employee who claimed that there

is no such practice in “tradition.”

The film then takes us to a photographed honeymoon of a couple at Jeju island, one of the most popular destinations in South Korea, for the last story of the trilogy: “Wedding into Tourism.” The three-day honeymoon package includes a tour bus and professional photography service. The newlywed tour group visits various popular shooting locations that are predetermined by the Jeju Tourist Association. The photographer claims that “honeymoon tour means nothing without photographing,” while the

young couple express their expectation for the role the honeymoon photos will play in their married life—however awkward they have felt during moments of rather unnatural construction to create romance and intimacy while in the eye of the public following the photographer’s detailed directions. The groom recalls the uneasy feeling he had one time thinking, “Do we really need to do this much for the sake of photos?” Yet the couple seems to treasure their honeymoon photographs as a visual record of their very special moments together.

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