SOO-YOUNG CHIN

KOREAN BIRTHDAY RITUALS

ABSTRACT. This paper, based on a four year comparative ethnographic study of late life rituals among Korean and Korean-Americans, discusses the ways in which late life rituals change to meet the differing and changing environments. Using the Korean 60th birthday ritual, hwangap, observed in Korea and the United States, the social context of aging in Seoul and within the ethnic Korean American community in San Francisco is discussed.

As Korea is undergoing vast social changes, the traditional ritual is compared to the transformed manifestations of the ritual. Migration to the United States provides another transformation of the traditional ritual.

Key Words: adaptation, elderly, Koreans, migration, ritual, urbanization

This paper addresses the manner in which late life rituals change to meet the demands of differing and changing environments. The changing social contexts of Korean elderly in Korea and the United States are examined. Two cases of the traditional Korean hwangap (60th birthday) ritual enacted in Seoul and San Francisco are compared to illustrate the way in which rituals change according to context. The comparative study of late life rituals is complex because rituals undergo change in both the host culture and the culture of origin.

METHODOLOGY

The data is from a comparative ethnographic study of late life rituals among Korean elderly in two cultural settings. It is based on 36 months of field work in two urban settings. I visited Korean senior citizens' organizations in San Francisco for 26 months and visited comparable senior citizens's centers in Seoul, Korea to target respondents for the study of 60th, 70th, 80th birthdays and 60th wedding anniversaries. Access to rituals was an issue in San Francisco due to the limited number of people going through the ritual during the time I was in the field. I observed eight such rituals in 26 months. In Korea, access to rituals was difficult due to the closed nature of the events. I observed 12 events in 10 months. Participant observation, in-depth open-ended interviews, and unobtrusive measures constituted the methodology, although the data were primarily collected by observation.

TRADITIONAL KOREAN LATER LIFE RITUALS

There are two types of rituals that pertain to the elderly. One is a specific hwangap ritual that Koreans observe as a passage into old age (Dallet 1954). The other is the general jesah or ancestral worship ceremony which is led by the elders in the family to honor the dead as well as to ensure the continuity of this tradition so that older members will be assured of their place in the ancestral

order (Osgood 1951). In some ways, the hwangap can be seen as the first in the series of ancestor worship ceremonies as the ritual is quite similar in terms of the functions of the descendants. The major difference is that the hwangap is a ceremony for living “ancestors” or the elderly.

**HWANGAP**

The hwangap ritual is the celebration of the 61st birthday by Korean count, or the 60th birthday by Western count. The ritual indicates the auspicious return to the year of birth which is five times around the 12 year lunar cycle. It is considered a very important marker in life and is the second time in the lifetime that Koreans traditionally mark the birthdate. Every other year except the first birthday, the entire population ages a year at New Year’s. In pre-industrial Korea the completion of the fifth cycle was also regarded as a sign of longevity due to the shorter life expectancy. Finally, the 60th birthday marked the transition of an individual from an active role in the family and society to an advisory role, a retirement of sorts.

There are seven elements to a hwangap that are essential to the traditional event:

1. It is conducted in the home as the home was the center of ritual activity in traditional, agrarian Korea.
2. Children must jointly plan and finance this event for both of their parents.
3. The children, and then the younger relatives of the sexagenarian, must take a full bow to the floor before the celebrant to show their respect. After this show of respect, they serve rice wine to the celebrant and spouse. Each of the celebrant’s children, starting with sons (and their wives) in birth order from the oldest to the youngest, must bow and serve wine. Men bow only twice while women bow four times to show their inferior status. The younger siblings and cousins of the celebrant also bow in similar sequence.
4. There is a prescribed table laden with special ceremonial foods like rice cakes, fruits, and cookies, stacked six to twelve inches high. At the table the sexagenarian and spouse should wear ceremonial white clothes to indicate a withdrawal from the working world into a more contemplative lifestyle. However, if the sexagenarian’s parents are still living, brightly colored clothing that mimic the clothing for the first birthday is worn. Wearing all white while one’s parents are still alive would be interpreted as a death wish because is both the color of retirement and of mourning.
5. Official invitations are sent out by the children of the sexagenarian to extended family members and friends.
6. Gifts, money and services – like offering to construct a tent or making clothes for the celebrants – are presented by guests to the celebrant for this special occasion.
7. Music, singing, and dancing are often part of the agenda. The program for