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The Cultural Assimilation of Chinese Wedding Customs and Traditions

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Weddings are memorable occasions that celebrate love and new beginnings in many different cultures. This is especially true in Chinese culture where an individual's wedding is one of the most important milestones in their young adult life. Chinese weddings are joyous affairs that take place over the span of many days. One of the many reasons why these weddings are significantly special and important is because they are heavily based on different traditions and customs. From everything including feasts, tea ceremonies, post-wedding celebrations, and the infamous wedding costume it all has a purpose and meaning to the people of this culture. However, lately western wedding ceremonies have become the new ideal wedding ceremony. This has caused a shift in Chinese wedding culture that threatens their ancient wedding customs and traditions. By examining different traditions of the ancient Chinese wedding such as the tea ceremony, the banquet, the wedding dress, and the post-wedding celebrations it shows how cultural assimilation into western-style weddings can be seen as a cultural crisis that threatens these important traditions and the greater good.

Ancient Chinese Wedding Traditions

In order to understand why assimilation into western-style weddings threatens Chinese wedding cultures and traditions, it is important to understand some of the traditions. One of the most important and well-known Chinese wedding traditions is the tea ceremony. The tea ceremony takes place after the procession to the groom's house but before the wedding ceremony¹ (Monger, 2004). The tea ceremony takes place at the groom's house and this is where the groom and bride's families are formally introduced. Before the tea is served by the bride's family to the groom's family the couple first "worships the ancestors and the heaven and the earth" (Monger, 2004). A special Chinese tea called *Tsao Chün* is served and the families mingle.

After the tea is finished, the couple receives lucky, red envelopes called *lai see* that include money and sometimes jewelry (“Chinese Wedding Traditions”, 2019). After the tea ceremony, the wedding ceremony began.

Chinese wedding ceremonies are seen as very simple compared to the other wedding traditions. During the ceremony, “the bride and groom would stand at the family altar where they would pay homage to heaven and earth, the family ancestors, and the kitchen god” (“Ancient Chinese”, 2016). After this part was over tea was served to the parents of the bride and groom that either contained two lotus seeds or two red dates. Finally, the couple would bow to each other which completed the ceremony and officially made the couple husband and wife (“Ancient Chinese”, 2016). Following the wedding ceremony, the most significant part of the wedding festivities began.

The banquet for many families is the most important part of the wedding ceremony. Some families choose to have multiple banquets over a series of days. This could be a separate banquet for the bride and groom’s family or multiple banquets over the span of up to seven days (“Ancient Chinese”, 2016). However, the most important banquet was the one held on the same day as the wedding ceremony. The wedding banquets were as big as the couple could afford which could lead to very lavish and expensive banquets. These banquets served as a public recognition of the marriage and lots of friends and family members were invited to celebrate (“Ancient Chinese”, 2016). This is unlike the wedding ceremony where only the parents and immediate family members were invited.

The wedding banquet which is also called a feast can cause tension between the bride’s family and the groom’s family because one family does not want to be outnumbered by the other. Before the food is served; the guests, family, and the couple play the game *mahjong* which

is the Chinese national game and take pictures with the bride and groom (Monger, 2004). The food is certainly the most expensive part of the feast and it includes twelve different courses. The majority of the food served is symbolic. For example, “a whole fish would be served because the word for fish, *yu*, sounds like the word for plenty, meaning a wish for abundance” (“Ancient Chinese”, 2016). Also, sweet lotus seeds were served during dessert because it was thought to promote fertility. Guests would also sign their name on a scroll or inside of a book and present gifts (“Chinese Wedding Traditions”, 2019). Most of the time this gift was monetary in nature to help offset the costs of the expensive banquet.

Another important part of the wedding ceremony is the traditional Chinese wedding costume. In China, the color red is seen as “a symbol of blessing” (Ghee, 2016). The color red can also be seen to symbolize “happiness, prosperity, and good luck” (“Chinese Wedding Traditions”, 2019). For these reasons, the color red is the main color for everything at the wedding ceremony, banquets, and much more. The bride’s wedding dress is also called a *qipao* and is a beautiful red with gold drawings. The bride will also wear a red veil in order to cover her face (“Chinese Wedding Traditions”, 2019). However, the bride does not stay in this costume the entire day. She changes her attire around four to five times and even changes after dinner as well (Monger, 2004).

In Chinese culture when a woman gets married, she leaves her family in order to join her husband’s family (Monger, 2004). The day after the wedding the bride has to wake up early, around sunrise in order to honor her ancestors. On this day as well, she would be formally introduced to her husband’s family. She would kneel in front of the elders and receive small gifts from each family member. Finally, the bride would receive a title from the groom’s parents based on his rank in the family (“Ancient Chinese”, 2016). Three days after the wedding the

newly married couple will go to the bride's home in order to visit her family. The groom is expected to bring a roasted pig and enjoy a meal with the family. Also, at this time the bride is no longer seen as part of her own family. She is only seen as a guest and is welcome to visit at any time ("Chinese Wedding Traditions", 2019).

Chinese Wedding Culture Assimilation

Globalization has allowed different cultures to connect unlike ever before but how does this affect other cultures' traditions? Globalization is the process of communication and assimilation among people and cultures worldwide. A study done in 2018 examined the different effects globalization has on wedding culture in China by examining wedding magazines and advertisements. According to the study, when China implemented an open-door policy in the 1970s this shifted the wedding market in China. The open-door policy allowed China to trade with all countries equally. The results of the study showed that Western wedding practices were advertised more in Hong Kong than in Mainland China by almost five percent. It was also determined that Chinese wedding publications promote more Western wedding customs than Chinese wedding customs overall. Also, it was shown that white wedding gowns are more advertised than the traditional red wedding costumes (Han, 2018). This study has shown that Western wedding customs are more dominant in China and in Hong Kong when compared to traditional Chinese wedding customs.

The main thing that globalization has affected in terms of wedding culture has been what the bride wears. Western wedding dresses were seen as the new and modern symbols of weddings while Chinese wedding costumes became seen as symbols of "nostalgia of tradition" (Han, 2018). It was determined that in Mainland China they are more willing to give up traditional wedding customs in exchange for western wedding customs. For example, when

China's wedding industry adopted the Euro-American bride many couples wanted a more modern wedding in order to get away from the ancient traditions and feel superior compared to their colleagues (Han, 2018). However, in Hong Kong, China they are more willing to preserve traditional wedding traditions. Citizens of Hong Kong are more likely to have the traditional red wedding costume, tea ceremony, and extravagant banquets.

Not everyone is completely transitioning to more Western-style weddings. For example, in Hong Kong, China they are advertising hybridized weddings meaning traditional Chinese wedding culture and Western wedding culture are mixed. This is also seen today in the United States. On August 10, 2007, NPR News did a live interview with a Chinese woman Joy Ma who married an American and had a wedding that combined both Chinese wedding culture and American wedding culture. At her wedding, she said she wore a white Western wedding dress and had a more American ceremony. However, she also wore a "Chinese wedding dress and a veil over a traditional headpiece decorated with phoenix patterns" ("Tradition with a Twist", 2007). She stated that they kowtowed to both her Chinese parents and her fiancé's American parents. Kowtowing is an act of bowing/kneeling to show respect. In Chinese culture kissing in public is not very prevalent, however, she mentioned that they kissed at her wedding which made some of her family members feel embarrassed ("Tradition with a Twist", 2007). In the interview, they also revealed that many Chinese American couples have American style ceremonies as well as the traditional Chinese wedding ceremony including the lavish feasts and the giving of monetary gifts in red envelopes ("Tradition with a Twist", 2007).

Some scholars could argue that specific Chinese ancient wedding customs should be changed to fit more Western customs. For example, historically Chinese women were "marginalized under the patriarchal system" (Han, 2018). They were not allowed to have an

opinion about who their husband would be or have a say in how they wanted their wedding to be. Chinese women were simply seen as pieces of property that could be willingly traded from one family to another. However, with Western wedding culture becoming more dominant this has allowed a shift in these views. Now, Chinese women are more likely to pick their husbands and have an opinion about aspects of their weddings unlike before (Han, 2018).

Ancient Chinese wedding culture is strongly built on ancient customs and traditions. For many older family members, this still applies despite the changing views. When these traditions are executed correctly it pleases family members and elders. Nevertheless, if these traditions are not done correctly or done at all for that matter it can offend and upset immediate family members, extended family members, and elders even to the point of “jeopardizing family ties” (Ghee, 2016). For example, wearing a white wedding dress instead of a red one can upset family members because in Chinese culture white is a symbol that represents death (Ghee, 2016). Ensuring that family members and elders are kept happy and not offended is very important in Chinese culture because they are very family and respect driven.

Weddings are very important events in many cultures for different reasons. This is especially true for Chinese couples during their weddings because they are composed of different traditions. For example, the tea ceremony is an important event done before the wedding ceremony in order to worship as well as be formally introduced to the bride and groom’s family members. Another important event that is done after the wedding ceremony is the banquet or feast. This is a large gathering of family members that can take place over multiple days. Certain games are played, and special foods are served in order to ensure good fortune for the couple’s marriage. Finally, the last important aspect of Chinese weddings is a red wedding costume. By wearing red, it symbolizes good fortune, happiness, and more. In Mainland China and in Hong

Kong, China more Western wedding traditions including the white wedding dress are being advertised more than traditional Chinese traditions. Today, many Chinese Americans are having hybrid weddings by combining both American and Chinese wedding traditions. Some scholars have argued that this assimilation has some benefits because it allows Chinese women to have more of a say in who they marry and their weddings which was not allowed before. However, this assimilation also threatens to upset or embarrass family members and elders if the important traditions are not done correctly or not at all. This can lead to the severance of important family ties as well. As globalization becomes more prominent in the world it allows many cultures to assimilate into more Western customs. This can be seen as a cultural crisis that threatens Chinese culture's unique and important wedding traditions as well as threatens the greater good.

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Footnotes

¹ There was a very clear difference between scholarly and non-scholarly articles. In the scholarly articles the authors studied how Chinese wedding customs were different compared to American/Western wedding customs. The scholarly articles also showed how these differences affected the people of Chinese descent. In the non-scholarly articles, they mainly addressed the different wedding customs for an audience planning a Chinese American wedding in very vague details. It was also very clear that there was more reliable information coming from the scholarly articles than the non-scholarly articles. There was a lot of debate about when certain customs occurred in the non-scholarly articles and there was not in the scholarly articles.