

Comparison on Wedding Culture between China and Western Countries

Lihong Xu*

School of Foreign Languages
Wuhan University of Technology, China
1561219946@qq.com

Meihong Xu

Zhong nan Hospital of Wuhan University, China
xmh100@126.com

Abstract—Marriage has played an important part in keeping the reproduction of humanity, social development and cultural continuity. Different countries have their distinct wedding cultures, which reveal the social life, ethics, religion, values, sexual consciousness and the development trend of national psychology. To enhance people's understanding of different cultures in the process of cultural globalization, this paper will analyze and compare the differences between Chinese and western wedding culture from the aspects of traditional values, religion and wedding processes.

Keywords—Chinese ethic views, Religion, Pre-wedding customs, Wedding day

I. INTRODUCTION

From ancient times to the present, marriage has played an important part in the reproduction of humanity, social development and cultural continuity. Marriage in different societies has formed its peculiar wedding culture and customs, which reveal the social life, values, ethics, religion, sexual consciousness and the development trend of national psychology. [1] It is a culture accumulation and spiritual wealth created by human beings. With the increasing development of world economy and acceleration of globalization, different cultures have undergone a process of clash and integration. People have more choices when it comes to their wedding ceremony, western or eastern, traditional or modern. No matter which style they choose, the profound values attached to the wedding customs cannot be ignored.

The traditional ethics and religious beliefs are always the most important cornerstone of marriage and stable family. In China, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have exerted great influences upon social life, political practices, economical activities, literary works, arts and education. Chinese thousand-year-old feudal system had been deeply rooted in the patriarchal clan system, which was based on blood relations. The patriarchal clan was essentially the politicization of the families. The family was a microcosm of a country, and the country was the enlargement of a family. This "Family-and-State Oneness" is well illustrated in the thoughts of great Chinese philosophers. Mencius said, "People always say that 'The world, the state, the family.' The root of the world is in the state, the root of the state is in the family, the root of the family is in cultivating oneself." [2] Confucianists put it in The Great Learning that "When the self is cultivated, the clan is harmonized. When the clan is harmonized, the country is well governed. When the country is well governed, there will be peace throughout the land." [3] As it was stated in Li Ji · Hun Yi that "Marriage is a combination of two families of different surnames. It performs the functions of serving the ancestral temple and keeping the family line of the paternal clan. Therefore, marriage is valued highly by all the people." [4] In other words, marriage is not just a personal matter, but instead, it concerns more about the destiny of an entire family. It undertakes the vital mission of human reproduction, breeding the descendants to offer sacrifices at the ancestral temple.

The founder of Taoism, Lao Tzu (Laozi) in his book Tao Te Ching wrote that "Tao created the One, the One produced the Two, the Two produced the Three, and the Three produced all things. All things carry the Yin (female) and embrace the Yang (male). Harmony is achieved through the interaction of these prime energies." [5] Human reproduction is dependent on marriage. Marriage is a holy thing, which results from the interaction of Yin and Yang in nature, without which the world will cease to exist. People believed marriages were planned by heaven, and happy marriages were the matches made in heaven.

Buddhism advocates Karma, the law that every cause has an effect, i.e., our actions have results. One's actions in the past will determine one's wealth, power, talent and even sex in future births. "We are the results of what we were and we will be the results of what we are". [2] Whom to marry and what kind of marriage one will get all depend on one's karmic action in past birth. As the saying goes, "It takes several hundred years of karmic effort for people to be at the same boat, and it takes several thousand years of karmic effort for a man and a woman to tie the knot". So, it is of high importance that the husband and wife should cherish each other.

Christianity is the most important and influential religion in western countries. Most Christian authorities and bodies view marriage as a state instituted and ordained by God for the lifelong relationship between one man as husband and one woman as wife. They consider it as the most intimate human relationship, a gift from God, and a sacred institution. According to the bible, God created Adam, man in his own image. Noticing that the man is too lonely, the Lord God created a woman for his companionship. "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man. While the man slept Lord God took one of his ribs and made it into a woman Eve, and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. Genesis (2:18-24) [6] At the heart of God's design, marriage should be based on mutual love and respect. Husband

and wife should love and respect each other just as in the same way as they serve God. and marriage plays a key role in the reproduction of humanity and the development of the world.

II. DIFFERENCES IN PRE-WEDDING CUSTOMS

A. Chinese Pre-Wedding Customs.

In feudal China, all marriages must be arranged by parents and the matchmakers. As the saying goes, “there’s no rain without cloud, there’s no marriage without matchmaker.” [7] Marriage without matchmakers would be taken as illegal and not be recognized by society. In addition, the stern patriarchal system in feudal China obliged the parents to stick to the principle of “Men Dang Hu Dui” while arranging marriage for their children. In other words, only two families of the same status or rank could go together, otherwise they would be mocked or even punished for marrying the low status people. Since Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC --- 256 BC) the wedding process should undergo some rituals such as “Three Letters and Six Etiquettes”. The three letters are Betrothal Letter, Gift Letter and Wedding Letter. They function as the documents of engagement, wedding gifts lists and marriage license. [8] The six Etiquettes are the six steps of the whole marriage procedure, including 1. Na Cai—bride-seeking and proposing, 2. Wen Ming-requesting for the bride’s name and birthdates, 3. Na Ji-asking for fortune, asking the fortune teller to predict whether the two are a good match, 4. Na Zheng - the groom’s family presenting bride price, wedding gifts (money, food, cakes and some sacrifices for worshipping the ancestors) to the girl’s family. 5. Qing Qi-selecting an auspicious wedding date. 6. Ying Qin—the big day, wedding ceremony.

It is interesting to note that a wild goose is always on the list of the gifts. It is a must at Na Cai, and at other rites, except Na Zheng. The wild goose is regarded as a token of a woman’s obedience, filial piety and faithfulness. Firstly, the geese are always punctual to fly to the south in autumn and fly back to the north in spring. They fly according to the rules of Yin and Yang, which symbolizes that the wife as yin should obey the husband as yang. Secondly, when the wild geese fly they are always in a row with the elder and stronger birds in the leading place and the younger and weak ones at back. This accords with Confucian ethics that the seniors should be respected. And as to the order of getting married, the elder children should marry first, and unless it is quite necessary, the younger ones should not marry before their elder siblings. No other birds can better embody this good manner except the wild geese. Besides that, the wild geese are always in pairs, once their mates die, they would stay single. Therefore, the wild geese can symbolize the loyalty between husband and wife. However, it is very hard to catch wild geese, so people always use domestic birds or ducks as the gifts instead.

B. Western Pre-wedding Customs.

In the history of western civilization, marriage was not always about love. Before 20th century, the family structure in America and European countries was mainly patriarchal with the men in dominant position in social affairs and domestic affairs, and women in subordinate position being dutiful daughters before marriage and helpmates after marriage. Like old China, young people did not enjoy much freedom in choosing their mates. Fathers had the legal right and obligation to select a spouse for their children. Usually they would consider the social rank and economic conditions of the other part. This phenomenon could find proof in Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice*. The first sentence gives us a glimpse of the marriage situation in the past, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of someone or other of their daughters.” In the past, among wealthy families, it was the parents’ duty to find a suitable husband for their daughter, preferably a rich one, and by skillful encouragement to lead the man to ask their permission to marry her. The girl’s family would give the newly-wed a sum of money called a dowry. Marriage was like a business deal. For middle class women, marriage was about securing a stable future and finding a partner that their families approved; for members of the upper class, marriage was a consolidation of wealth and power. Parents often arranged such activities as family parties and even debutante balls in order to find a suitable person - class peer-for a mate. Today, under the influence of democracy and individualism, many western people view marriage as an individual commitment, a personal matter. They emphasize on mutual affection, sympathetic understanding of the marriage partners. They do not need matchmakers, even parents rarely interfere. In the Western romantic tradition, a couple meet, fall in love, and marry.

Marriage is usually initiated by a proposal of marriage. When a couple goes steady and has been together for a long time knowing each other very well, they will invite the other part to meet their family members in quest of their congratulations and encouragement. It is a rule that the man should ask the father’s permission to marry the bride-to-be. Traditionally, the man proposes to the woman and the actual proposal often has a ritual quality, involving the presentation of an engagement ring and the formalized asking of a question such as “Will you marry me?” The man may even go down on one knee before proposing. This practice stemmed from chivalry of medieval times. Knights in the service of a lady would frequently display their readiness to take orders by bending the knee in the mistress’s presence. Similarly, the modern version in marriage indicates that the man is willingly at the service of the woman and is ready to offer his husbandly “services”. [9] If the woman agrees, she will place the ring on the third finger of her left hand. The engagement ring given by the man is just a public declaration to marry and a means of discouraging the attentions of other young men.

III. DIFFERENCES IN WEDDING DAY CUSTOM

A. Red Wedding vs White Wedding.

In China, red is a lucky color symbolizing happiness and prosperity. Chinese wedding is known as the red wedding, from

the decoration of the nuptial chamber, the wedding hall to the bridal sedan and most importantly the wedding costumes, all in red. The groom wears a red cap and a long red gown with a big red silk-made flower on the chest. The bride wears a chaplet and red wedding gown (feng guan xia pei) and a pair of red satin embroidered shoes. Besides, the bride also needs to wear a red veil of silk. This custom originated from an ancient myth about Nü Kua and Fuxi, who were credited with creating humanity and establishing marriage ritual. When the world first began, there were two original humans with snake-like tails, Nü Kua and her elder brother Fuxi. They lived on Mount K'un-lun. For the sake of the procreation of humanity, they talked about becoming husband and wife. But they felt ashamed, so they prayed to heaven: "Oh Heaven, if Thou wouldst send us two forth as man and wife, then make all the misty vapor gather. If not, then make all the misty vapor disperse." [10] At this, the misty vapor immediately gathered. To cover her shyness, Nü Kua made a fan of grass, and used it to cover her face. As time went on, people began to make red veils of silk to replace the fans.

Different from Chinese red wedding, western wedding ceremony is mainly in white. The bride's wedding dress is usually white or ivory, which symbolizes purity and innocence. It is said that Queen Victoria wearing a white gown in her wedding to Prince Albert started the trend in wearing white. The bride also needs to wear a veil. People believe evil spirits are around to try and ruin the wedding ceremony. The bride wears a veil to cover her face so evil spirits would not know she is the bride. Likewise, bridesmaids are made part of the ceremony to surround the bride, so evil spirits would be confused about who the actual bride is and leave. The bridesmaids will wear matching dresses to accompany the bride.

A very common custom still honored today in western countries is that the bride should wear 'something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue, and a silver sixpence inside your shoe'. [11] "something old" is something given by a relative. This signifies the continuity with the bride's family and the past. "something new" symbolizes the bride's new life. "Something borrowed" is something borrowed from a happily married woman such as the bride's wedding dress, or the veil, or the jewelry, symbolizing that good fortune in marriage is supposed to carry over to the new bride. "Something blue" denotes faithfulness and loyalty. In biblical times blue represented purity and constancy. Brides often choose to wear a blue garter to keep to this tradition, or blue ribbons in their hair to symbolize fidelity. "A sixpence in her shoe" is to place a coin in the bride's left shoe to wish her good fortune and prosperity.

In western culture, it is considered bad luck for the bride to be seen by the groom before the wedding day. There is also the superstition for the bride to avoid wearing the dress before the day and see herself in the mirror, because something that prevents the wedding may happen. It is unlucky for the bride to make her own wedding dress. Some brides leave all trust to the dress maker. Some dress makers leave some stitches unfinished and only do the last finishing stitches before the bride leaves for the wedding.

B. Joyful and Jubilant vs Quiet and Romantic Atmosphere

Chinese wedding is bathed in the atmosphere of jubilation. At the wedding day, to meet the bride, the groom wears a big red silk flower on his chest and rides on a big horse in front of the bridal sedan and the escorting team. Musicians accompany the procession playing auspicious music all the way. People also play firecrackers along the way. At the bride's home, the relatives and friends will play varied tricks on the groom before he enters the room and takes the bride away. At the departure of the bridal sedan, the bride's parents would scatter a bowl of water and rice. This signifies that their daughter is married off and would never be dismissed and sent back like poured water. They also wish her secure life in future. The wedding procession should choose another route back to the groom's home according to the custom of no turning back. Cheerful music and firecrackers continue along the way. Arriving at the groom's home, the newlyweds need to cross a saddle in quest of lifelong security. In some places, the groom needs to carry the bride and step over a small burning brazier to scare away the evil spirits and hope for a prosperous family life. At the wedding hall, the new couple will Bai Tang. They first bow to the heaven and earth to pray for the blessings, then to their parents to express gratitude for their upbringing, and last to each other to show their respect and love for each other. In the nuptial chamber guests and friends will throw all kinds of lucky things to the newlyweds sitting on bed, peanuts, yellow beans, grains, pine seeds and melon seeds and the like. These things stand for fertility, the more the couple catch the more children they would have. Besides, people will tease the bride with jokes and tricks. This custom is aimed to disperse the evil spirit and add more joy to the wedding.

Western wedding ceremony is filled with quiet, solemn and romantic atmosphere. In the church, the groom and his attendants stand with the priest, facing the audience. Music signals the entrance of the bride's attendants, a wedding party of bridesmaids, maid of honor, flower girls and ring boy. Young flower girls decorate the bride's path with flower petals dropped from her basket. The scattered flowers symbolize fertility and prosperity. The bride is usually the last to enter the church, escorted by her father. The bride and groom will make their wedding vows, promising to love each other "for better, for worse: for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy law..." Most wedding vows are taken from traditional religious ceremonies, but nowadays people choose to revise their favorite love poems or lyrics from a love song as wedding vows and some couples even choose to write their own vows. There is also an important double ring ceremony. The bride and groom exchange rings to symbolize their eternal love. After the ceremony, outside church the bride will throw her wedding bouquet over her shoulder to the unmarried women. It is believed that the one who catches it may become the next bride. After the reception, the newly married couple will take a honeymoon vacation. Honeymoon, a term with European origin, means "month of honey". In ancient times, the Nordic tradition in a marriage was to give the new couple a quantity of mead enough to last them a full lunar cycle or a "moon". Mead is a drink brewed by the fermentation of honey. It was believed that by faithfully drinking mead for that first month, the woman would "bear fruit" and a child would be born within the year.

IV. CONCLUSION

Through the comparison of Chinese and Western wedding culture from the aspects of the traditional ethic values, religion and wedding processes, we can find that Chinese weddings are more complex and sophisticated but jubilant, western weddings are simple but sacred and romantic. With the increasing globalization, different cultures interact and integrate with each other more frequently. Under the influence of western culture, some Chinese choose western white wedding. Of course, many people still favor Chinese traditional red wedding. Some may even combine Chinese style with the western style, Bai Tang in white wedding gown and black suit. Nowadays, there are more and more transnational marriages. The westerners are deeply interested in traditional Chinese wedding culture. They wear red wedding costumes, ride horse or sit in the sedan. Despite the many apparent differences in Chinese and western wedding culture, the two types of wedding are same in the essence, marking a new stage of one's life and showing people's high regard for marriage. To understand different wedding customs enhances cross-cultural communication and cultural continuity.

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