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## Social Relations of Marriage and House

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### Introduction

Nowadays in China with overheated demand for real estates and an upheaval of housing market, there is a common saying that a man who wants to get married should prepare a wedding house called *hunfang* (婚房) before getting married; otherwise he may have no girl who would get married to him.

This might be a bit over-exaggerated saying. However, a house is indeed an important material object for young couples in China. Money and material gifts, *liwu* (礼物) such as liquors, cigars, candies, tea leaves and so on are still considered to be an important part of the bridewealth in China. However, nowadays besides those material gifts, housing estate is also getting to be the part of the primal bridewealth among Chinese.

Nancy Jervis (2005) also described this relatively new tendency of acquiring marriage houses, *hunfang* accompanying the economic boom in China during the 1980s, with referring the Chinese newspaper cartoon, which criticized the practices of constructing a new house for male infant in order to improve his ability to attract a suitable bride for his future<sup>1</sup>. Traditionally in China, in order to prepare for the future, “houses are usually built with ‘extra’ rooms for one-day-to-be-married sons and their wives and in anticipation of the later development of a stem or even joint family structure. These rooms, once inhabited only by the couple, increasingly become private space belonging to the conjugal unit” [Jervis 2005: 225]. Nowadays, young couples prefer more private spaces and autonomy from their parents. Consequently, needs for *hunfang* is rapidly increased in China.

Since “anthropologists, including those who specialize in China, have long noticed the close link between house form and the structure of the family” [Yan 2005: 373], traditionally house and family of China had been closely linked and discussed. However, focuses are much on the structure of the family, not on the social relations of those.

In this brief paper, by focusing on the practice of preparing new houses called *hunfang* upon their wedding among urban Chinese couples, I would like to consider the social relations of marriage and house and meaning of *funfang* with ethnographic descriptions and data which had been collected through participating observations conducted in *Nanjing*, China during August to September 2010<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese cartoon of *Renmin ribao* (*haiwai ban*) is drawn with lines “*erzigangzhousui, jiugaihaojiehunxinfang* 儿子刚周岁，就盖好结婚新房” (Our son is just a year old, so we’ve just built him a new marriage house) [Jervis 2005: 225]. See Jervis for detail.

<sup>2</sup> However, the total period of social research program which I had participated in was two months long: from July 25 to September 25 of 2010, most of research was done in August.

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Although I had been participating in several wedding events in *Nanjing* such as Wedding Expo (婚博会) supported by a large local internet company, *Xici* (西祠), and match making sessions called *Xingqiaohui* (省桥会) in public parks, in this paper I would like to focus on describing two cases of couples: the one in their mid-twenties and the other in their mid-thirties. Former couple had conducted their wedding rituals and banquet in August 2010 and the latter couple is already engaged and planning to conduct a wedding ceremony in spring of 2011. It is quite lament that there is not enough space to examine modern Chinese wedding situations with describing the process of wedding rituals, and other wedding practices such as Wedding Expo and match making session in public parks. I do hope to closely discuss these topics in another paper near future.

The plan of this paper is as follows. In the following section, I would like to indicate the meaning of this study briefly. The purpose of this paper, the reason of focusing on the house will be briefly noted. Next section presents profiles of two couples. There, couples' background and the process of preparing *hunfang* are described. Finally, indicating the implication of this study and I conclude this paper.

### **House as a actor, crafting new social network**

Although there are still many issues and topics under debate from many aspects among scholars of the Chinese family and marriage, it is widely agreed that drastic change has occurred in Chinese domestic sphere. Indeed many scholars have discussed about the changes of marriage form, post-marital residence and family division after marriage [Cohen 1976, 1992; Freedman 1966; Wolf 1972; Yan 2006]. However, their research focuses are mainly on social relational changes of persons such as emerging new relations of bride and mother-in-law, couples and matriarchal uncles, and women's status changes under transitional period as a daughter to a young daughter-in-law [Wolf 1972; Yan 2006]. As being obvious, most studies of Chinese marriage focuses on the interpersonal relations, not merely on the relations of persons and things. Commodities of bridewealth such as modern houses and material gifts, and persons such as bride, bridegroom and their family are all in action to craft a network of new social relationships. Both things and persons are socially significant actors which should be observed anthropologically. However, these relations are overlooked for long time.

Although I stressed on a tendency of slight disregard of “things” in Chinese literature of anthropology of marriage, the Chinese term of wedding gifts indicates that gift is more than material present. Yunxiang Yan noted that “The term for gift in Chinese is *liwu* (礼物), a word composed of two characters. The first character *li* (礼) means rituals, properties, and ceremonial expressions of ethical ideals such as filial loyalty and obedience [see Weber 1968: 156-57]. The second character *wu* (物) means material things. It is interesting that, etymologically, the Chinese term indicates that a gift is more than a material present—it carries cultural rules (proprieties) and also involves rituals. So, a *wu* without *li* is just a thing, not a gift” [Yan 1996: 44]. Yan pointed out that a gift exchanged without practicing rituals is not considered to be a proper gift, but just a thing. This view is quite reasonable. However, I consider

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*wu* (thing) itself is also more than material object.

In his review paper, Daniel Miller reconsiders the meaning of consumption and commodities which shed some light on a major anthropological transformation of perspectives [Miller 1995]. There, he pointed out that gifts and commodities transcended its original formulation as good versus evil. We have to reach beyond good and evil evaluations of things since this might be our obsession of western knowledge. Especially in contemporary western thought, things represent the natural universe of commodities. At the opposite pole there are people who represent the natural universe of individuation and singularization [Kopytoff 1986: 64].

From a cultural perspective, the production of commodities is also a cultural and cognitive process: commodities must be not only produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing [Kopytoff 1986: 64]. Igor Kopytoff stressed on things must be produced as commodities, however once they are obtained by persons and getting in new phase of the relationships with them, things are not treated as commodities but something different as culturally shaping of biographies. In this sense, the modern house that is prepared as a wedding gift is not an evil commodity but a unique agency to transform the human relations by everyday practice even without practicing rituals. In practical level, a house is already getting to be the part of significant bridewelfth. In this sense, this paper will examine a house as an active actor which is crafting social networks. The house is merely a static material thing.

## **Marriage and House: Two Case Studies**

As briefly mentioned above, in this paper I would like to consider *hunfang* as more than just a static material thing. Things and persons are interwoven to craft new social relations. In order to discuss these closely interwoven relationships, firstly we need to clarify the newlywed couples backgrounds closely.

In this section, two couples' social background and the process of preparation of wedding ceremony are described. Firstly, couple A in their mid-twenties' case will be described and then couple B in their mid-thirties' case will be discussed.

### **Case 1: The couple A in the mid-twenties**

#### **● Profile of the couple**

After graduating Science and Technology University in *Anhui* Province, the bridegroom who originally came from *Anhui* Province had worked for Technical Enterprise in *Nanjing* where he met his bride to be. Now he is working for IT Company in *Nanjing* and his average monthly wage is around 8,300 RMB<sup>3</sup> (approximately 107,900 JPY). It is quite high salary compared to average.

The bride, a native *Nanjing* girl, had graduated Polytechnic College in *Nanjing* and worked for

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of this research had conducted (August 2010), the Chinese currency, one *Renminbi* (RMB) was worth about 13 JPY.



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Technical Enterprise where she met her future husband. Now she works as an accountant for a Chemical Trading Company in *Nanjing*. Her monthly wage is 2,000 RMB (approximately 26,000 JPY). They both were born in 1986 and their age of marriage was 24 years old.

They were engaged in December 2009 and had conducted a gift exchange ritual in August 2010. Bridewealth called *caili* (彩礼), from bridegroom's side to bride's family was 10,001 RMB (approximately 130,013 JPY) which means "choose you as one in million". Material gifts, *liwu* were boxes of cigars, liquors, candies and tea leaves. In return, bride's side had prepared gifts called *jiazhuang* (嫁妆). Those gifts were electronics appliance as TV and refrigerator, and furniture such as dining table, chairs, bed (see plate 1 and 2), wardrobe and so on. In this case, *hunfang*, a new house for newly married couple, was not prepared solely by bridegroom's side as popular saying. They had jointly purchased a modern apartment with applying a bank loan by themselves.



**Plate 1: Preparing a bedroom  
(August 8, 2010)**



**Plate 2: Conducting a wedding ritual at  
*hunfang* on their wedding day  
(August 28, 2010)**

### ● The detail of their *hunfang*

Their housing estate is located in *Xianlin* (仙林), newly developing area of the eastern part of *Nanjing*. *Xianlin* is recognized as one of the three *Nanjing* satellite cities. Rapid development of this area is largely due to the opening of the new station of *Nanjing Metro* line 2 in May 28, 2010. This area has been developed under concept of "new college town" and regarded as a comparatively high-end residential area. Since renowned universities and International schools such as Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing University of Finance and Economics, Nanjing University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Nanjing International School and so on are concentrated in this area, *Xianlin* is regarded as the best bed town with excellent academic environment and an ideal place for raising children. New riches who wish to have their children educated in good environment are eager to live in this area.

Considered to be good neighborhoods, stylish residential buildings are mushroomed in *Xianlin* area. One of such a modern residential apartment is the couple A had selected as their *hunfang* (see Plate

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4). Compared to the bride's parents apartment (see Plate 3), newlywed couple's apartment is remarkably stylish and modern.

The apartment was designed and planned by a famous award winning architect, a professor of Nanjing University. Furthermore, it is equipped with 24 hours security system and several gate guardians, a pond, flower gardens and a park. This housing estate had started to sell its units in lots from May 2010 and established a young community. It consists of 205 units and most of them are occupied by young married couples<sup>4</sup>.



**Plate 3: Appearance of the apartment of bride's parents house (natal home)**

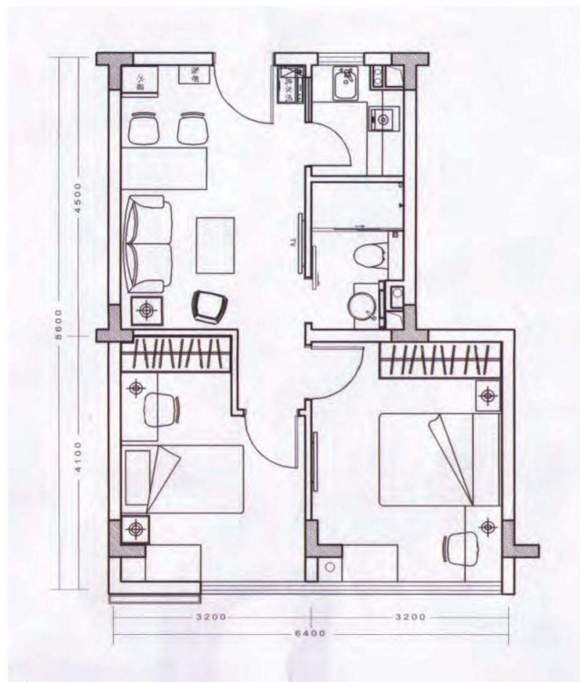


**Plate 4: Appearance of the apartment of couple A's hunfang**

The housing unit they had obtained is 57 square meters with 2 rooms and 1 living room, *liangshiyiting* (两室一厅) as seen in Fig. 1. The unit costed 580,000 RMB (approximately 7,540,000 JPY) and co-owned by both bride and bridegroom. However, housing loan is divided as 60% for bridegroom and 40% for bride at the moment of purchasing. The loan is scheduled to be paid off in following 10 years.

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<sup>4</sup> In China, the house of newlywed couple shows many signs. For example, on the day of their wedding, they put red colored stickers designed of Chinese character *shuangxi* (囍) which means “double happiness” on the windows (see the window of Plate 2).



**Fig. 1: Floor Plan of the Case 1 Couple**

In China, most housing units are sold with minimum condition so that owners could arrange and reform interior of the house according to their preference. Since this unit is quite new and high-end housing estate, all basic equipments such as floor, wall and doors were already installed and interior decorations were all done. Any additional housing decorations and extra repair were not added by them.

### ● **Preparation of Marriage in the *hunfang***

My first visit to the *hunfang* of couple A was in August 8, 2010. It was 20 days prior to their wedding day, which was scheduled on August 28, 2010. At that time, only the bridegroom had lived in this apartment alone. The bride said she will not move in the apartment unless their wedding rituals would be all done. Since her natal home is located in the northern part of *Nanjing* which is 30 minutes distance away from her *hunfang* in *Xianlin*, she visited their *hunfang* occasionally to decorate with their wedding pictures and preparing for their wedding rituals and banquet.

The day I visited was the occasion of gift-wrapping for wedding banquet (see Plate 5). Both bride and bridegroom stuffed with candies in small red boxes and decorated boxes with golden nylon ribbons carefully. Those small gifts were given away at their wedding banquet. Small hexagonal red box contains six milk candies with golden ribbon which called *xitang* (喜糖) would be given away to each guest at the final moment of the wedding banquet. They had installed most of their needed furniture and electronic appliances already. Their *hunfang* seemed to be the perfect nest for a newlywed couple. Before conducting wedding rituals, the bride's existence in *hunfang* is temporal, even though her frequent visit to the *hunfang* is significant. Her attachment to the *hunfang* on her wedding day is the most important part



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of the Chinese traditional wedding.



**Plate 5: Preparing of *xitang***

The symbolic separation and unification of the bride between two set of places: the bride's natal home and *hunfang*, are the most important part of the Chinese wedding rituals. On their wedding day, bride would finally move in *hunfang* as for her new place to belong. Bride's physical transition from natal home to *hunfang* makes her social status change dramatically. She left her natal home as a daughter and was welcomed as a new member of the bridegrooms' side as a bride. Her new affiliation is crystallized and fixed by her physical transition of two places. Without *hunfang*, women's status transition upon wedding is not ritually conceptualized.

## **Case 2: The Couple B in the mid-thirties**

### **● Profile of the bridegroom**

The second case is the couple in their mid-thirties. They were both born in mid 1970s. They are planning to have wedding ceremony around spring of 2011.

The bride to be was born and raised in *laochengnan* (老城南), an old district of *Nanjing*. The bridegroom was born in *Sichuan* Province and had spent his college years in *Nanjing*. After leaving *Nanjing* and spending some years in *Beijing*, He was offered a good job opportunity in *Nanjing* in 2005. That is the reason he moved back to *Nanjing* in his late twenties again. With his friends help, he decided to rent a small room near his work venue. It was located in 20 minutes distance by bicycle and costed him 1000 RMB per month<sup>5</sup>.

The price of real estate had been getting higher day by day at that time. Even though he did not have any special girl friend to get married to him at that time, four months just after his arrival to *Nanjing*,

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<sup>5</sup> He had paid only 200 RMB per month as his rent since he was financially aided by his employer.

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he decided to purchase an apartment for future. He decided to buy a house of 98 square meters with 2 rooms and 2 living rooms *liangshi liangting* (两室一厅). It costed 362,600 RMB (approximately 4,713,800 JPY). His employer offered him 100,000 RMB (approximately 1,300,000 JPY) to buy a house so that he could use this money as 30% down payment of the total price. His parents offered him 50,000 RMB to do some interior decoration and repair of the house.

The house is located in the rapid developing residential area of the southern *Nanjing*. The location is not as convenient compared to his prior room which was located in the central area of *Nanjing*. New house took him about one hour and half to commute.

### ● The life with parents

In 2006, he moved to new house to start a new life. Although he had some good friends from College days who were willing to help him in *Nanjing*, he did not have any relatives or close acquaintances other than college friends at that time. Therefore his retired parents living in *Sichuan* province had moved to Nanjing in 2007 to live with him and to do daily chores for him. At that time, his parents had not decided yet whether they would sell their old house in *Sichuan* and permanently live with his son in *Nanjing*. They thought they would miss old life in *Sichuan* after spending some years in new place; therefore they wanted to keep their old apartment back in *Sichuan* for the possibility of change their mind in the future.

After several months, it turned out to be his mother was quite good at accustomed to new environment by living friendly together with neighbors. She had strived to cultivate an abandoned land near their apartment and harvesting vegetables was her great joy and new hobby in *Nanjing*. On the other hand, his father wanted to go back to *Sichuan* even long after coming to *Nanjing*.

However, in the matter of course, after sometime his parents had gradually accustomed to the life in *Nanjing*. Then they had changed their mind. They decided to sell the old apartment left in *Sichuan* and planned to start their new life with their son in *Nanjing*. They made up their mind to live in *Nanjing* permanently. However, situation had suddenly changed.

### ● Match making

Since his job had been getting busy day by day and there were no time to find an eligible woman to get married to him, his mother gradually started to attend public meeting sessions called *Xingqiaohui* (省桥会) in *Baima* Park (白马公园) for searching her son's bride to be<sup>6</sup>. His mother did a very good job. In 2007, he was introduced by his mother to a native *Nanjing* girl who is a high school teacher. They found out that they have much in common. Since then, they have started dating.

Key person of his marriage was surely his mother. However, once couple decided to get married, they prefer to start their new life by themselves. Then bridegroom asked his parents to go back

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<sup>6</sup> I visited *Baima* Park for hoping to observe present situation of the match making session in late September of 2010. However, I just found out that there was nothing to be observed. Manager of the park informed me that there is no more *Xingqiaohui* in the *Baima* Park.



to *Sichuan* or move out to smaller apartment in *Nanjing* by themselves. The bridegroom and his parents were quarreling everyday for over 2 months about parents' residence. His parents wanted to live together with their son and their son's wife in *Nanjing*; however young couple does not prefer to do so. Especially his girl friend severely rejected of co-residency with her in-laws. Although things had been really complicated, the bridegroom and his parents finally decided to sell the house which he had bought in 2006 and decided to purchase a new house as *hunfang*. He bought a second hand apartment of 66 square meters which is located in the place where comparatively close to his fiancée's natal home in old district of *Nanjing*. Right after interior decoration and repair work would be finished, he will move to their new apartment and his parents will leave *Nanjing* for going back to their hometown, *Sichuan*.

Bridegroom parents actually wanted to stay in *Nanjing* since their new social relations have been built in *Nanjing*. However, it was financially impossible for them to buy one more house for old parents in *Nanjing* beside *hunfang* for young couple. He said that he does hope to buy another apartment for his parents in *Nanjing* within 5 to 10 years, but not for sure at this point.

## Discussion

The basic information of two couples is summarized as Table 1 below. Significance and social meanings of modern Chinese marriage could be discussed in many ways; however, I would like to focus on a single perspective in this paper.

**Table 1: Basic Information of Two Couples**

	Couple A	Couple B
Age	in mid-twenties	in mid-thirties
Bride's Place of Origin	Nanjing	Nanjing
Bridegroom's Place of Origin	Anhui Province	Sichuan Province
Date of Wedding Ceremony	Autust 2010	Spring 2011
Price of the House	RMB 580,000	RMB 362,600
Living Space	57 square meters	98 square meters
Floor Plan of the House	2 rooms, 1 living room	2 rooms, 2 living rooms

In this final section, I would like to suggest an implication of this research that house is not just a material thing or expensive gift upon marriage, but connecting both bride and bridegroom tight, anchoring man who was stranger in the city and giving him a stable position, and transmitting woman from a daughter of her natal home to new member of the bridegroom's family as a bride. In this sense, *hunfang* is a significant agent that makes change.

As seen in the previous section, brides of both couple A and couple B were local Nankineses. They were both born and raised in *Nanjing*. On the other hand, both bridegrooms came from other

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province: *Anhui* and *Sichuan*. Geographical background of bride and bridegroom might be a strong factor of determining the acquisition of *hunfang*. This point should be examined and discussed more carefully with cross-checking of other ethnographical data. However, the bridegroom of couple B told that in the match making session, most expected condition for men upon marriage is availability of the house. Whether he owns a house as *hunfang* or not may decide his marriage possibility. He added that if one wishes to get married to *Nanjing* girl, he should have owned a house in Nanjing. This indicates that house is not only a part of bridewealth, but the object that uplifting man's social status and making his urban residency stable.

On the other hand for women, house is also a significant thing upon marriage. Doing an extensive field research in Northeast China, anthropologist Yunxiang Yan (2006) points out that in a traditional Chinese family, young women were marginal outsiders with only a temporal position, as daughters married out and new daughters-in-law entered the domestic group under the rules of patrilineal exogamy and patrilocal post-material residence. Thus, daughters were commonly regarded as drain on family wealth and new daughter-in-law was seen as potential threat to the existing family order [Yan 2006: 106].

However as Yan points out, young women have challenged patriarchal power in term of the family division, place of residence and marriage negotiation. Those new tendency of marriage is also found out the case of my informants as I showed here especially in the case of the bride of couple B. Bridegroom and bride who are considered to be unstable outsiders: bridegroom as a newcomer in the city and bride as new member of bridegroom's family are now firmly anchored in their new place, *hunfang*.

## Conclusion

In this brief paper, I explore modern Chinese tendency of acquiring *hunfang* upon wedding by indicating two small case studies of two couples. My purpose of this paper is to set up the preparation study for describing big picture of the social relations of marriage and house with focusing on the house as an active actor which is crafting new social relations together with persons.

In this paper, I pointed out that *funfang* is the vital thing to connect all actors. In this sense, *hunfang* is a materialization of interpersonal relations, or "tie-signs" [Goffman 1971: 194; Yan 1996: 106-107]. As a bridegroom who is outsider of the city, *hunfang* is the key object to tie him down in urban life and his new social relations. As a bride, *hunfang* is the main object to change her social status. The ritual of transitional movement between bride's natal home and *hunfang* on her wedding day is the most important part of Chinese marriage. Bride's physical transition from natal home to *hunfang* makes her social status change dramatically. She left her natal home as a daughter and received as a newly member of the bridegrooms side. In this way, her new affiliation is fixed by her physical transition between two places.

Although this is the very first step to consider the social relations of marriage and house in China, I have to admit the scarcity of ethnographical cases and data. More data should be accumulated

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for further discussion.

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