
Marriage Customs in Nanjing

Sheng LI

Master's Program in Nanjing University

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is just showing the details of marriage custom in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, China. When Han Chinese people are going to marry, they usually perform a ritual which consists of three-steps which: the engagement, the wedding ceremony and the first return of the bride to the home of her parents after the wedding ceremony[Fei 1934]. In the following, I will describe the process of the marriage customs with the historical background more in detail.

Nanjing is the capital of Jiangsu province, and it is the political, economic and cultural center of Jiangsu province. Nanjing is across the *Changjiang*(长江) river. Its area is about select 6600 square kilometers , and the population is 624 million, and urban population is nearly 5 million. Nanjing is the deputy provincial city, Jiangsu provincial's capital, national famous historical and cultural city, national comprehensive transportation hub, national important innovation base, regional modern service center, advanced manufacturing base of the *Changjiang* river delta, ecological and livable city on the bank of the *Changjiang* river, and it is the important center city of the Yangtze river delta with Connecting the east and west of the country.

Nanjing have built 2,500 years, with a long history, and it is a famous Chinese historic city. There was 10 dynasties built capital in Nanjing in the history, such as Eastern Wu, Eastern Jin, Song, Qi, Liang, Chen, Southern Tang, Ming, the Taiping heavenly kingdom (太平天国), the Republic of China, so it is called "the capital of ten dynasties". Nanjing has 11 areas (*Baixia* 白下区, *Xuanwu* 玄武区, *Gulou* 鼓楼区, *Qinhuai* 秦淮区, *Jianye* 建邺区, *Xiaguan* 下关区, *Yuhua* 雨花区, *Qixia* 栖霞区, *Pukou* 浦口区, *Jiangning* 江宁区, *Liuhe* 六合区) and 2 counties (*LiShui* 溧水县, *GaoChun* 高淳县).

1. Engagement

According to the traditional values of the Han culture, the authority of the parents within the family is emphasized. Even in modern times, when marriages are decided by the two partners themselves, their parents still will play decisive role. Moreover, it is nowadays not uncommon that the marriage of young Chinese is still arranged by the help of matchmakers both in rural and urban China. Besides, to

marry is considered to be a filial duty for young Chinese. As a matter of fact, to remain unmarried while becoming older is regarded to be very uncommon, so traditional values still have an important influence within the society.

If the marriage is arranged, the two spouses will build up their relations according to the wish or the orders of their parents or by the help of the matchmaker who functions as an intermediate for both sides. Two families are involved into the marriage.

In feudal times, neither the man nor the woman had the right to decide his or her marriage on his own. During the Republic of China Period, between 1911-1948, marriages decided only by the two partners directly involved gradually began to appear. So naturally the age and the appearances of the two partners for the first time were taken into consideration, the mutual inclination of the spouses became more and more important. On the other side, the status of the family, rank and value were seen to be less and less decisive.

After the PRC was established in 1949, the arranged marriage was abolished by law, and the freedom for everyone to decide his own marriage independently was widely implemented in the society. Nevertheless, the marriages, introduced by matchmakers still played a major role for the great majority. After the 1980s, partner agencies, which in accordance with the new situation, provided people convenient service to find the appropriate partner.

In former times there was a traditional custom in Nanjing, that the mother of the bride once should visit the mother of her future son in law. During this occasion, the mother of the future son in law certainly offered a cup of tea. If the mother of the bride was not convinced that the qualities of her future son in law would ensure a happy marriage, she would decline to drink from the tea, by which she expressed her refusal; if she would accept the tea, she made clear, that she did not object the marriage. It was out of question, that she accepted the tea but refused the marriage.

The betrothal in contemporary times is not as complicated as before. The young women and men will just inform their parents, relatives and friends after they have made a decision. Usually parents of the bride will pay a formal visit to the parents of their future son in law, in order to get to know each other and to learn about the economic conditions of his parents[Zhou, Xing 2008]. The parents of the two sides will give their consent especially when the reason for marriage is love. In comparison to former times the procedures are more simple after the marriage is decided. Many young man have a serious attitude and act in a romantic way, for example they regularly might offer presents to the bride such as rings, a necklace or a bunch of roses as witness of his love. Once the engagement is decided, the most

urgent thing to do is decorate the new house, buy furniture, appliances and other necessities.

2. Wedding Ceremony

Local residents of Nanjing are very peculiar about the date on which the ceremony should be held. The time is usually negotiated by the fiancé, the fiancée and their parents. In general, the date is chosen on even days according to the Chinese traditional lunar calendar or also to the western solar calendar, usually the days during holidays and festivals are chosen. [He 1997]. Recently, many people also prefer a date, which consists of the number “eight”, because of the similarity of the in Chinese pronunciation this word could also have the meaning “fortune”, for example the 8th, 18th and 28th day of every lunar month. As for important holidays and festivals, it is likely that “New Year’s Day”, “Spring Festival”, “May Day” and “National Day” are preferred, because during these days it is more likely, that relatives and friends will have free time to attend the wedding. Since the appearance of photo studios, it became fashionable for the couple to use their service and to let them do a series of wedding photos in memory of this unforgettable day. Since the 1980s there emerged a new trend according to which men preferred to dress in western suits and females in bridal dresses during this occasion. The 1990s saw another fashion which is, that the couple decide to have a series of pictures done in photographic studios or that the lovers are arranged by the photographer in places of interest, for example in public parks like the Garden of Lovebirds or the Sun-Yat-sen-Mausoleum in Nanjing. Recently, not only photos are done, but also wedding videos have become popular, which can be condensed into a compact DVD disc to be easily kept.

To greet the bride is the most important part during the wedding ceremony, with which the husband shows respect for her. It was a custom in former times that brides sat in bridal sedan chairs and her future husbands rode on horses. During the 1960s and the 1970s, there were only few people who could afford to use sedans chairs.

In former times, the marriage is considered to be the most important event in the life of the bride, the bride was under no circumstances allowed to enter the house of her husband on foot. Most people used bicycles instead. Nowadays, sedan chairs or cars, usually shiny and with even numbers, are fashionable, especially imported cars of high quality. The cars are decorated with posies, the car of the bride is thoroughly ornamented with beautiful flowers, with the Chinese character xǐ “囍” which means “happiness”, as well as balloons and toy dolls in the frontage of the cars (Plate 1, 2). Before this custom was prohibited in urban areas, fire-crackers were also set off in accordance with the happy atmosphere. At the

time when the bride leaves the house of her mother and enters the home of her husband and proceeds to the wedding hall, balloons, rather than fire-crackers, are more frequently used in modern society.



Plate 1: Car



Plate 2: Xi

After the liberation in 1949, local residents tend to hold the ceremonies in a new way. Since the 1950s, men and women have to go to the registry office in the civil administration department of the city to apply for a marriage license. They usually also will invite their colleagues to have a tea party at their place of work and to offer them candies and cigarettes. Between the 1960s and the 1970s, group weddings, organized by the communist youth league of their places of work as well as by the trade-unions became popular, in accordance with the revolutionary spirit of the time. Around the late 1970s, going on a honeymoon became fashionable. Since the middle and late 1990s, splendid and extravagant wedding celebrations became more and more popular. Invitations were sent to relatives and friends before the wedding. Any one who received an invitation would probably also give his or her share of monetary gift.

With promotion of the living standard, the share given by the guests raised, ranging from 200 *yuan* at least to 400 or 600 *yuan*. Shares of more than 1000 *yuan* were also not uncommon. Professional masters of ceremonies were hired to lead the wedding ceremony, during which *Wedding March* or some other cheery songs are used as background music. The bride and the groom bow three times to their parents and guests to express their gratitude. They also present a toast to the guests, give presents and offer cigarettes one by one at the beginning of the wedding celebration. The master of the wedding ceremony is expected to create a warm and joyful atmosphere during the celebration. He also will ask the couple to describe the process of their engagement, to exchange wedding rings and to kiss each other and

so on. After the ceremony the bride and groom are accompanied into the bridal chamber, which is now generally booked in hotels, restaurants or they just go to their new homes .

3. Wedding Banquet

Before the liberation ordinary families had the wedding banquet at home due to economic restrictions. Wedding specifications used to be “four bowls and four saucers”(Commonly known as “four big and four small”) or “six meat dishes and six vegetable dishes”, the highest standards were “five bowls and eight saucers”. If four saucers of desserts were added, it could be called a banquet. Complete chicken, ducks and fish usually were served with braised fish as the last course. At the end of the feast rice could be served. Most young couples host the wedding feast as a matter of thrift after the PRC was established. Even keeping one or two the standards were not high. In the late 1980s, with the high rate of economic development, the standards of the wedding banquet improved. Such banquets were no longer arranged at home, but hotels, restaurants were chosen. Because they were considered to be auspicious numbers, tables with serial numbers like “four”, “six” and “eight” were selected. During this period of time, weddings frequently were celebrated in hotels and restaurants of medium level or higher level. Those who are particular about extravagance would choose the Jin Ling Hotel, the Xuan Wu Hotel, Ding Shan Hotel and other high-level hotels. Candies and cigarettes as gifts were also necessary, which could be distributed to guests after the wedding feast. At the end, the bride together with the husband would stand at the door seeing the guests off and making farewells.

4. The first visit of the bride to the parents home after the wedding

Three days after the wedding, the newly-married wife, in company with the husband, will pay a visit to her mother. The couple is required to bring gifts in even numbers to express their gratitude of bringing her up.

References

- Fei Xiaotong. (1934). *A Study of the Custom of Bride-fetching in Chinese Wedding*, Sociological Academia Vol.8. (In Chinese)
- He Xixiang eds.. (1997). *The Auspicious Words in China*, Shanghai Book Store Press, pp.9-10. (In Chinese)
- Zhou Wuzhong, Xing Dingkang eds.. (2008). *The Study of Tourism* Vol.3, Southeast University Press, p.109. (In Chinese)