

The Rites of Matrimony

Excerpted from *Mooncakes and Hungry Ghosts: Festivals of China*

Many of the elements of seasonal festivals—food, dance, fortunetelling and ritual—are also found in the celebrations of important events and passages in the cycle of individual and family life.

Among the celebrations of these events, the most richly colorful is the rite of matrimony. Like the sense of renewal that accompanies the onset of the New Year, the wedding also marks a time of great expectations, familial closeness, and new beginnings.

Our focus here is on the elaborate wedding ceremonies arranged for couples paired by village matchmakers, as observed mainly in Taiwan. The traditional way of meeting and becoming engaged through an intermediary is still practiced, especially in rural areas of Taiwan and the People's Republic, although communication, mutual attraction, and personal choice characterize a growing number of marriage decisions in present-day China.

Weddings today can range from simple civil ceremonies, where the bride and groom sign a marriage contract purchased at the corner stationer's shop, to long, complex betrothals with a dizzying array of nuptial rules to follow, symbolic gifts to bestow, and formal teas to attend. In all cases, however, there is more to the occasion than just being "joined together" as a married couple. In Chinese terms, the wedding ceremony is a statement to the ancestors of the groom's family that the family has brought in a daughter-in-law, a person who will help continue the descent line for another generation and aspire to preserve the integrity of her husband's household.

Finding the Right Man

My maternal grandparents or "outside grandmother" and "outside grandfather"—one of the words in maternal grandparents the same as in foreigner or barbarian-

"outsiders" tracked BaBa down by following the invisible red string that ties his ankle to MaMa's. Year by year the string grew shorter.

The outside grandparents had four daughters, and so one of this grandmother's habits whenever she heard of an interesting boy or young man was to count him. Using the poor people's divining method, she took a pinchful of rice, said his name, and counted the grains to see if she had picked an odd or even number, carefully dropping each speck back into the rice box. Odd meant Yes, this boy was her daughter's true husband; even meant No, wrong boy; four sounds like die. In addition to counting rice, she confirmed the results by paying an expensive blind fortuneteller to touch a list of young men's names, and he picked out her future son-in-law. He also used the yarrow sticks and tortoise shell and told the wedding date.

CHINA MEN, by Maxine Hong Kingston

Finding a Match

Traditionally in China, on the seventh day of the seventh moon, young Chinese girls presented the Weaving Maiden, patroness of unmarried girls, with numerous offerings and had their fortunes told in hope of receiving a favorable report on the type of man they would marry. Having little say in the matter of marriage, their fate rested in the hands of the Goddess of Matrimony and skillful matchmakers.

Today, in many rural communities, the matchmaker still plays a significant role in joining a young woman and young man together. If the girl is of marriagable age (somewhere between 18 and 23, although many young women, especially in urban areas, wait until they are in their late 20s or early 30s before considering marriage), her family is contacted by a matchmaker who sets up an initial meeting with the prospective groom (usually the groom's family takes the initiative in finding a bride and appointing the matchmaker). On this occasion the young girl presents tea to her guests. When she serves tea to the young man, she has her first awkward moment, the chance to look closely at him and size up her marital fate.

According to custom, if the young man approves of the young woman, he tentatively places a small embroidered red cloth bag on the saucer, and if she has a mutual feeling, she quickly accepts it. However, if she doesn't find him appealing, she leaves the room before he has a chance to present the bag. Nowadays, to avoid embarrassment, young people give and take the bag regardless of their level of attraction—the only gauge for approval being the size of the

pouch. In still other cases, especially in Taiwan, the "betrothal tea" is abandoned for chaperoned meetings held in the plush, mirrored interiors of city sweetshops and coffee houses.

Assuming the young people are interested in each other after a formal introduction, their Eight Characters--the year, month, day and hour exchanged to see if they are compatible. The art of interpreting Chinese horoscopes has endured through countless generations, and those skilled in its practice are consulted in the hope of averting matrimonial disaster. What does the modern matchmaker look for? According to popular rules of astrology, the most incompatible matches are signs on the astrological compass that are directly opposite each other and thus in conflict. Generally speaking, the worst relationships are made between the squabbling rat and restless horse, steadfast ox and whimsical ram, moody tiger and competitive monkey, brooding rabbit and forthright rooster, assertive dragon and proud dog, skeptical snake and carefree boar. For "marriages made in heaven," astrology experts suggest seeking out members within your "affinity group":

rat, dragon, monkey-ambitious and energetic

ox, snake, rooster-purposeful and steadfast

tiger, horse, dog-humanitarian and idealistic

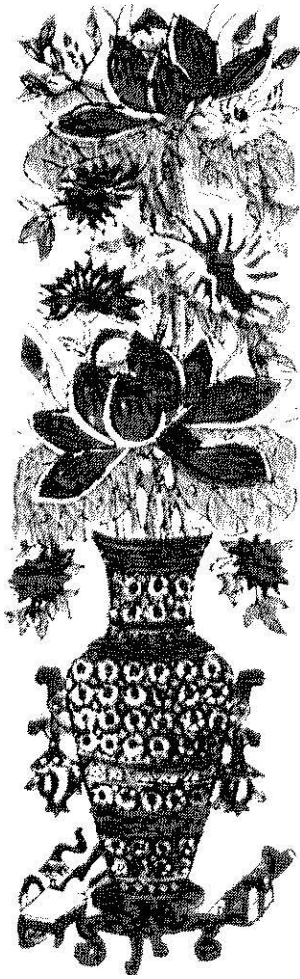
rabbit, ram, pig-emotional and artistic

the idea being that similar personality traits guarantee an easygoing, harmonious relationship.

After a preliminary evaluation of the horoscope, the matchmaker sends the girl's Eight Characters to the prospective groom's house to be placed on the ancestral altar for three days. If no unfortuitous events occur, such as family illness or an object breaking, the young man's family will consider this a good omen and send their son's Eight Characters to the girl's family, who will follow the same procedure. Once the Eight Characters have been accepted by both sides, their dates are recorded together on one piece of red paper and the groom's family commissions a gold ring to be made for their son's future bride.

People today in their 70s and 80s still remember having their Eight Characters written and checked when they were very young children and, if the stars were favorable, becoming engaged to someone as early as age five. In the countryside it wasn't unusual for a boy to marry between seven and ten. His wife was usually older, between 12 and 18, and would for a time take care of him as an older sister would a younger brother. In wealthy families, however, it was common for the groom to be 10 or 20 years older than his young bride.

(Continues below...)



Engagement

The engagement becomes official with the presentation of the "12 betrothal gifts" by the groom's family to the bride and her family. In the countryside, many of these items consist of pairs of livestock: two ducks, two chickens, two lambs, two pigs, and so on. In urban areas, pairs of store bought items such as shoes, handkerchiefs, and blouses are more common. In addition, sugar-coated wintermelon, tangerine tarts, pomegranates, silk-thread noodles (vermicelli), dried longan, and pagoda-shaped candies are sent, as well as gold bracelets and jewelry. The number of gifts would make any young bride smile with delight, but out of politeness the bride's family does not accept them all. To ensure the good luck of the male's family, the cocks (symbol of male vigor) are usually returned along with some of the other goods. Following the fine points of bridal etiquette, however, not enough items are returned to imply that the presents were in some way unacceptable.

While the groom's family is busily preparing engagement gifts, the bride's family reciprocates with 12 presents for him. Among these gifts are lanterns, incense and candles, firecrackers, wine, ham, deer horn (valued for its medicinal qualities and used as an aphrodisiac), and bird's nest (a Chinese delicacy used in soups). Like the bride's family, the groom's family accepts only some of the gifts, such as the lanterns and incense, and returns the rest. In some cases the bride's family sends a trunk full of theater costumes, and if the boy's family is in full accord with the wedding arrangements, they stage a small romantic folk opera accompanied neighborhood musicians to celebrate the joyous occasion and thank the ancestors for their good fortune.

The engagement is announced to the bride's family and relatives distributing "betrothal cakes," boxed and unboxed, that are provided the groom's family. These delicate white cakes, which taste something like Danish butter cake, have a thin filling of sweet syrup and are topped with sesame seeds. The more elaborate boxed cakes imply that the recipient is expected to give a wedding present in return.

Finally, the most important of all the presents to the bride is the grand gift that comprises the formal request of marriage along with a substantial amount of money. It isn't unusual for a family to spend half its annual income on acquiring a bride. For a financially well-off family in Taiwan, even 20 to 30 years ago, the average amount of gift money was \$2,500. For most economically successful families today, every effort is made the parents to provide an adequate monetary foundation for launching the newly married couple's life together. This amount can be combined with the 12 gifts or given separately at a later date.

After the items are presented in front of the groom's ancestral shrine, the bride's family invites the groom's family to receive tea. As the bride offers sweet tea to the elders of her future husband's family, they place a red packet of money on the tea tray. When she has completed this part of the formal tea, the high point of the engagement ceremony begins. The matchmaker seats the bride-to-be on a chair in the ancestral hall. If she is facing the door with her back to the home altar, this indicates she will be leaving her family for the groom's household; if, however, she is seated facing her father's ancestral table, this means the husband will be moving in with her. Once the bride is seated, her future mother-in-law (not her fiancée-he isn't even present) places a golden ring on her finger. An auspicious wedding date is chosen according to the almanac, and the rest of the time (usually a year elapses between the engagement and the wedding) is spent accumulating a plentiful dowry and attending bridal showers.

Bridal Curses

Traditionally, the separation of a bride from her family was one of the most painful experiences a young woman could expect to face in her entire life. Never having been away from home, she could find marriage extremely lonely as she tried to please a demanding mother-in-law, fit into a new domestic routine with competitive sisters-in-law, and find time and energy to become acquainted with her newly-met husband.

The bride associates warmth, comfort and security with her father's house, and coldness, discomfort, and unease with the groom's house. To ventilate her anxious and often suppressed feelings, she is allowed to mourn the loss of her immediate family, revile the matchmaker, and scold the groom's side for three days before the wedding through "weeping songs" (*kuge*) or "marriage laments" (*hunge*). This is a common bridal custom in such areas as Guangdong, Shanghai, Guangxi, and Hubei.

Some of the verses are memorized, others are cued by sisters, relatives and friends, and sometimes the curses are spontaneously created by the bride, revealing her wit, drive, and personality. Crying and laughing, wailing and cursing, the bride likens her fate to impending death. The need for a bride to weep, however, is slowly diminishing as the modern woman has a greater voice determining her future mate.

The Bride Sings, the Bride Weeps

On her third to the last evening at home, MaMa dressed in white. A lucky old woman, who had a good woman's long life, helped her wash her hair, though this being modern days she only sprinkled water on her head. Dressed in white, MaMa sat behind her bedcurtains to sing-and-weep. "Come and hear the bride cry," the village women invited one another. "Hurry. Hurry. The bride's started singing•• and-crying." "Listen. Listen. The bride's singing. The bride's weeping."

They sat around the bed to listen as if they were at the opera. The girl children sat too; they would learn the old and new songs. The women called out ideas: "Cry about the years your mother held you prisoner." you're ransomed at last." "Scold your mother for not finding you your husband sooner."

"Give me a rifle to shoot my mother down," MaMa wailed. "Mother, you've kept me working at your house. You've hidden me from my husband and family. Mother, I'm leaving you now. I'm aiming my rifle at your stomach and shooting you down."

"Oh-h-h," exclaimed the women. "She's the best crying bride I've ever heard." The drummers banged. The bride's mother stood against the wall and smiled proudly....

The women punctuated her long complaints with clangs of pot lids for cymbals. The rhymes made them laugh. MaMa wailed, her eyes wet, and sang as she laughed and cried, mourned, joked, praised, found the appropriate old songs and invented new songs in melismata of singing and keening. She sang for three evenings. The length of her laments that ended in sobs and laughter was wonderful to hear.

-CHINA MEN, by Maxine Hong Kingston

THE WEDDING

Three days prior to the wedding, the dowry is transported on a lengthy line of carts, something like a betrothal float, to the groom's home. The bride's clothing, household furnishings, domestic linens, and gifts of money are elaborately and openly presented on each cart for all passersby to see and admire.

Taking Leave, Seclusion, and Arrival

On the day of the wedding, the nervous bride begins the final stage of preparation for her new identity as she transforms herself from filial daughter to devoted wife.

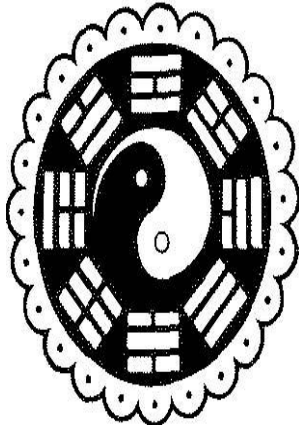
The bride bathes and puts on the layers of her wedding dress. Traditionally, the inner garments were white and were meant to be later used as her funerary garments. The outer garment included an embroidered red skirt that would be remade into baby clothes for her first child. Her hair would be adorned with tinkling ornaments, kingfisher jewelry, and golden arrow hairpins (to fend off malign spirits). Today, however, most brides in Taiwan and Hong Kong forgo

the traditional look for a Western-style white gown which is rented or purchased just for the occasion-they will also rent the traditional costume for wedding photographs.

A veil concealing her features, the bride is lifted into the red sedan chair. Brass gongs are clanged to hasten her entrance into the sedan chair (today it's more common to use a taxi). If she lingers too long between the door of her home and the door of her nuptial carriage, her good energy will likely remain at home and the wealth of the family will escape through the door.

As she ascends, an umbrella or rice-winnowing basket is held over her head so she will not be observed from heaven in this liminal state. A great deal of weeping and hugging between the bride and her mother occurs at this emotional moment as she begins the journey away from her parent's household.

In old times, green bamboo was used to support the bridal sedan



chair to symbolize the purity of the bride. If the bamboo still had leaves showing, this signified the long life of the bride's relatives. The bridal procession was led by the matchmaker and followed by the groom's assistants, the younger brothers of the bride and bridegroom, musicians, and lantern bearers. (Today, everyone crowds into a fleet of taxis.) As the procession moved slowly through the streets to the groom's home, the bride would toss wintermelon candies out of the palanquin to symbolize the abandonment of her bad habits. And if by chance the bridal parade met another, the matchmakers exchanged paper flowers to avoid canceling out each other's good fortune.

Strings of firecrackers are set off when the procession arrives at the groom's home. the bride descends, lucky phrases are spoken and a variety of symbolic rituals may be performed. Sometimes a basin of smoldering coals is set before the bridal chair to consume any bad spirits that may have traveled with the bride. Splashed with a cup of wine, the basin ignites in brilliant flames to symbolize the prosperous life expected of the newly paired couple. The bridegroom shoots several arrows into the sky to chase off any lingering ghosts and then the bride descends from the sedan chair holding an apple or a vase. These two objects are selected because they rhyme with the first syllable of the word "tranquility" (*ping*). She may be asked to step over a saddle as well, since that item sounds the same as the second syllable of "tranquility" (*an*). An embroidered cloth with the eight trigrams and *yin-yang* symbol is hung up to dispel any ill fortune.

New Identity

A young boy presents tangerines symbolizing good fortune to welcome the new bride, and an old woman who is a friend of the family and whose life has been filled with luck escorts her through the groom's house. The reception room is decorated with bright red hangings containing the double characters for "happiness" (*xi*) in gold lettering and painted scrolls of the Twin Gods of Mirth and Harmony, He He Erxian, the connotation being "two in body, but one in spirit."

The bride and groom bow three times to the ancestral shrine in the main hall and then enter the newlywed room. Here, they drink from goblets tied together by a red ribbon and then, crossing arms, they exchange the cups and drink again. After eating a light repast of "sons-and-grandsons" cakes and longevity noodles, they prepare for the evening banquet.

The bride changes into a red satin evening gown for the wedding feast, her arms covered with gold and jade bracelets. All of the groom's relatives seat themselves according to rank to view the young couple. The groom is expected to toast each guest and the bride offers tea and candy as a means of introduction, receiving in return the ubiquitous red bags filled with gifts of money.

After the feasting is over and the bride and groom prepare for the wedding night, they are subjected to a seemingly endless barrage of lascivious jokes and sayings about fertility, procreation, and the new bride's virginity (which is still not totally uncommon, especially among young women who have few opportunities for unchaperoned dates). In the old days all rules of etiquette and propriety were suspended for three days in a custom referred to as "bringing down the newlyweds' bedroom." If the men were too boisterous and rowdy in their comments, the bride's family would jump in and reprimand them. The next day, the bedsheets or the bride's undergarments were checked to report on their nuptial success.

Having endured to this point, the bride eagerly awaits the third day of the marriage, when she and her husband visit her parents' household. On the 10th day she again makes a visit to her family, but this time alone, regarded now as a newly married woman, a member of another family.

Rats' Wedding Day

A popular folk custom in China concerns the rats' wedding procession. Around the New Year holiday, children were told that if they went to bed early and were very quiet, they might hear the sounds of the rats' wedding party. Rats and mice were not welcome guests in a home-increasing numbers of them suggested the approaching dilapidation of a household. Therefore, New Year prints of the rats' wedding were hung in the home, probably as a kind of talisman to ensure that these annoying creatures would eventually leave.

Rats were left undisturbed only a few days out of the year (usually the third day of the 12th month, the seventh of the 12th, or the 19th of the first) so, as folklore claims, they could get married without interruption. If the wedding proceeded without a hitch, the grateful rats would not pester the inhabitants of the household for the remainder of the year.

Images of the wedding processions are very charming, showing the rat bride and groom with a host of attendants accompanying them-musicians, lantern-bearers, gong-beaters and palanquin carriers. Sometimes a cat about to pounce on a rat appears in the effective magical image that might drive the rats from the household. The presence of the cat also figures prominently in a folktale where the cat is selected over the sun, clouds, wind, and wall as the bridegroom. In the end, the cat reigns supreme by eating his new bride.

Symbolic Foods

Roast Pig In Guangdong and Hubei Province, a succulent offering of roast pig was sent to the bride's family on the third day after a wedding as a sign of the groom's family's acceptance and pleasure with their new daughter-in-law.

Wild Goose A wild goose is the quintessential symbol of marital harmony and fidelity. Because geese mate for life and migrate together from season to season, they are considered dependable, reliable creatures. Pictures of wild geese flying in pairs make very appropriate wedding presents. If wild geese cannot be obtained for a betrothal gift, domestic geese are permissible or even, as a last resort, humble chickens will do.

Egg Soup On the day of the wedding, the groom is cordially served a bowl of soup upon his arrival at the bride's home. It contains an unbroken soft-boiled egg which he is expected to break to symbolize the bride's leave-taking from her family. Sometimes the groom's mother-in-law will put a hard-boiled egg in the soup, making him try a little harder to break the yolk in order to gain his bride.

Pig's Heart The bride packages together a pig's heart along with other

ingredients to make a soup for her in-laws on the day of the wedding to suggest that they are "all of one heart."

Fruits and Nuts Because a wealth of puns can be made from Chinese names for fruits and nuts, they are symbolically used during the wedding ceremony to imply many children and good fortune. For example, folded inside the marriage quilt, one might find peanuts, dates and nuts-the second syllable in the word for peanut is sheng, which is homophonous with the word "birth" and the word for date (zaozi) sounds the same as the "early arrival of a male son." For the same reason, when the bride is presented in the main hall to her mother-in-law, she may be offered a plate of dates and chestnuts with a cup of fragrant tea.

Tea A gift of tea (once an expensive commodity) was highly regarded in China's past, thus it was often used as an engagement present for the bride-to-be. Today, accepting the "gift of tea" is synonymous with the term for engagement.

The Last Emperor's Strange Wedding Night

Puyi (1906-1967), the last emperor of the Manchu dynasty, selected his bride from a photograph. The wedding lasted five days, with three days of theater performances and the bestowing of new titles. The procession included guards and cavalymen, 72 dragon-and-phoenix umbrellas and flags and 30 pairs of imperial lanterns. The wedding presents ranged from silks and satins, cloisonne vases and porcelain dinnerware to ornate carpets with dragon-and-phoenix designs and beautiful scrolls wishing long life and good fortune.

The wedding night was spent in the Palace of Eastern Tranquility which according to Puyi "was a rather peculiar room: it was unfurnished except for the bed-platform which filled a quarter of it, and everything about it except the floor was red. When we had drunk the nuptial cup and eaten sons-and-grandsons cakes and entered this dark room I felt stifled. The bride sat down on the bed, her head bent down. I looked around me and saw that everything was red: red bed-curtains, red pillows, a red dress, a red skirt, red flowers and a red face ... it all looked like a melted red wax candle. I did not know whether to stand or sit, decided that I preferred the Mind Nurture Palace, and went back there."

EMPEROR TO CITIZEN, by Pu Yi (translated by W. J.F. Jenner)

Marriages in Hell

Trapping a husband for a young girl takes on an entirely different connotation when the bride-to-be is a ghost. According to popular belief, such spirit unions occurred because a girl who died in childhood decides some years later that she needs a husband to give her children. Her "children," who are the living man's offspring from a real marriage, are then obliged to worship the ghost as their mother, providing it with offerings as though she had actually married when alive.

Such arranged spirit marriages assure that the dead girl's soul won't bring misfortune to her natal family or siblings' families, because she is now cared for and happy. Such a marriage also allows the bride's ancestral tablet to have a place of honor in her "husband's" household rather than a secluded position on her father's altar where she would be put if she had no descendants.

Sometimes the girl's spirit will alert her parents to her desire for marriage by appearing in a dream or by causing some mysterious sickness that can't seem to be cured by ordinary methods. A trance medium will then be consulted to diagnose the problem. When the family realizes the urgency of their daughter's request they'll try anything to find her a husband. One cunning method for a speedy betrothal is to place on a road a money purse containing the girl's name and horoscope. The first unsuspecting male passerby (married or unmarried-it doesn't matter) to pick up the purse is designated by the family as the dead girl's groom. Usually, the promise of a sizable dowry induces the man to readily agree to the marriage.

The marriage mimics an ordinary wedding in almost every detail, complete with a representation of a smiling bride. The girl's ancestral tablet is transformed into a doll bride. First, it is padded into the form of a figure with arms and legs, then dressed in a miniature wedding gown, ornamented with gold-colored bracelets and pendants and, as a finishing touch, topped off with the face of some beautiful cover girl cut out from a magazine.

Engagement gifts consist of wedding cakes and money, and the dowry includes boxes of fabric, clothing, and jewelry that the groom's living wife (if he is married) can use. Feasts are held at the bride's home and the groom's home. On the day of the wedding, the dressed "bride" sits in the family room of her home with her back to

the altar. Upon leaving, the bride's brother escorts her to the taxi-cab which takes her to the groom's house. The tablet is placed in a chair next to the groom during the feasting and is later placed in the bedroom on the wedding night. The next morning it is positioned on the groom's family altar, its final resting place, where it will occupy a position of authority and respect for generations to come.

This custom has been reported as slowly dying out, but in some locations spirit marriages were still fairly common in the late 1960s and continue to be "celebrated," though less than in the past.