



## Chinese Wedding Customs

Chinese wedding customs varies greatly from place to place or even village to village due to China's vast expanse. There are also remarkable differences between traditional and modern Chinese wedding customs. The following summary includes some of the most well-known wedding rituals in China that reflect the richness of Chinese culture.

### **ANCIENT MARRIAGE CUSTOMS**

#### **Letters**

In olden days and for some traditional Chinese today, all communication was through formal letters, which played an important role in the betrothal and wedding process. There are three letters.

1. The Request Letter confirms the formal arrangement of a marriage and is sent by the groom's family to the bride's family. This letter usually accompanies the first gifts for the bride's family.
2. The Gift Letter accompanies the formal gifts for the Bride's family. In actuality it is a gift registry which records and describes the value of the gifts.
3. Wedding Letter is given to the bride's family on the actual wedding day. It is a confirmation of the act of bringing the bride into the groom's family.

#### **The proposal**

The ritualized process begins with the Proposal, an elaborate marriage proposal and acceptance. This process was traditionally placed in the hands of a woman matchmaker. After the groom's family identifies a young girl whom they believe to be a good choice for the groom-to-be, the family will hire a matchmaker, who will act as a go-between and will communicate their wish to the potential bride's family. In the past, elderly ladies or midwives were hired to play in this role. She presented gifts to the girl's parents and tried to figure out how they felt about the match. Through a sometimes tedious process of mediation and negotiation, the matchmaker usually were able to persuade the potential bride's family to accept the offer from the groom's family. Both sides negotiated certain terms and proceeded to the next step.

#### **The Betrothal**

First both sets of parents exchanged family credentials as tokens of intention. Then, after extensive bargaining, the two families would arrive at the amount of money and goods that would make up the gift to the girl's family. After presenting engagement tokens, the matchmaker would ask the bride's family to chose among

several auspicious wedding dates suggested by the boy's family and also set a date for presenting betrothal gifts.

The boy's family presented betrothal gifts of money and significant items such as tea, "Dragon (male) and Phoenix (female)" bridal cakes, pairs of male and female poultry, sweetmeats and sugar, wine and tobacco, accompanied by an itemized statement of these gifts. Tea was such a primary part of these gifts in some areas that they were known collectively as cha-li, that is, "tea presents." The girl's family reciprocated with gifts of food and clothing.

The boy's family's gifts acknowledged the parents' efforts in raising the girl. Several days after the presentation of the betrothal gifts, the girl's family sent porters with an inventoried dowry to the boy's house. The dowry consisted of practical items, including a chamber pot, filled for the occasion with fruit and strings of coins. This procession gave the girl's family the opportunity to display both their social status and their love for their daughter, and wealthy parents often included serving girls to attend their daughter in her new home.

### **The Wedding**



In contrast to the elaborate preparations, the wedding ceremony itself was simple. The bride and groom were conducted to the family altar, where they paid homage to Heaven and Earth, the family ancestors and the Kitchen God, Tsao-Chün. Tea, generally with two lotus seeds or two red dates in the

cup, was offered to the groom's parents.

Then the bride and groom bowed to each other. This completed the marriage ceremony, except in some regions, where both also drank wine from the same goblet, ate sugar molded in the form of a rooster, and partook of the wedding dinner together.

### **CONTEMPERARY WEDDING CUSTOMS**

Even though the wedding customs in China have been changed greatly since 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can still see the application of ancient customs in modern Chinese weddings. The following are some interesting examples.

### **The Selection of an Auspicious Wedding Date**

Auspicious days are subject to interpretation by fortunetellers that perform the analysis based on one's birth date (day and hour) after consultation with the Chinese almanac. Almanacs containing predictions for the entire year are sold at the beginning of the Lunar New Year by street vendors and in bookstores. These paperback books are approximately two inches thick with a wealth of information about Chinese beliefs. It is said to be the oldest continuous publication known. Different versions are published in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China, but unfortunately an English version is not available.

In the Chinese community it is considered bad form if an individual consults the almanac and performs a self-analysis. That is why a fortuneteller or Fung Suey [Feng Shui] expert is consulted. They usually can also provide horoscope information in advance of the publication of the almanac.

The 15-day period from the middle to the end of the seventh lunar month is considered inauspicious because that is time of the Hungry Ghost Festival when the gates of Hell are opened and the lost spirits are allowed to wonder the earth. They should not be invited to your wedding!

### **The Color of Red**

Red is central to the wedding theme of China. It signifies love, joy and prosperity and is used in a variety of ways in Chinese wedding traditions. The bride's wedding gown is often red, as are the wedding invitations, and wedding gift boxes or envelopes for cash gifts. Even the bride and groom's homes are decorated in red on the wedding day.

### **The Use of "Double Happiness" Paper-cut**

Each half of the symbol is the standard character for happiness, written "hsi" or "xi," and pronounced something like "she" in Mandarin (high level tone –; the first tone). Therefore, two "hsi" graphs together represent the wish for the two young newlyweds to have happiness together. The double happiness graph (pronounced "shuang-hsi" in Mandarin) is a special Chinese character used for marital happiness. It's not used in regular Chinese writing or printing.



### **The Wedding Ceremony and Reception**

Only the couples' immediate families usually attend the wedding ceremony. Just after the ceremony and before the wedding reception, the bride who honors tradition will serve tea to her in-laws in a formal ceremony. The couple will usually go to a professional studio for wedding pictures before they proceed to their reception.



An MC who is hired for the occasion usually performs a welcoming speech. A cake cutting ceremony follows the speech. The traditional wedding cake is immense, with many layers. The layers symbolize a ladder that they couple will 'climb to success', so couples will cut the cake from the bottom and work their way up. The cutting of the cake is the only event of the reception. The bride and groom feed each other a piece of cake with arms entwined, trying not to destroy the bride's elaborate makeup. A piece is then cut for each of the

parents and for the grandparents, who are fed by the bride and groom holding the cake together. Sometimes a wedding toast is given and guests are invited to greet the newlyweds and their parents. Musical entertainment, which ranges from a simple keyboard player to a symphony or orchestra, accompanies the receiving line. It is customary for guests to shake hands again before leaving the reception. At more elaborate Chinese weddings, a sit-down reception may feature a 9 or 10 course meal as well as musical entertainment.

Chinese brides often change outfits at least three times during the reception.