

Traditional & Modern Wedding Procedure

NOTE: Text in red indicate most of the traditional wedding procedures, while text in black are more of the modern practices.

A. Traditional & Modern Wedding Procedures

In the past, the prospective bridegroom's side would send letters to the family of the bride. There were a total of Three (3) letters 三书 (san shu):-

1. Initial gifts were presented together with a letter requesting for a marriage.
2. If the bride side agreed with the wedding: Formal gifts were given to the bride's family together with a letter listing out all the formal gifts.
3. On the day of the wedding, a wedding letter was presented to the bride's family to show that the bride has become a member of the groom's family.

In addition, it is common to observe 6 steps 六礼 (liu li) or etiquettes leading towards the actual wedding process:-

1. Getting a match-maker to convey the groom's family request to the bride's side.
2. Exchanging both bride & groom's date of birth to check on their compatibility.
3. If all goes well and both parties are happy with the arrangement, the groom's side would send an initial gift together with a letter requesting for the marriage.
4. If the bride's family accepts the wedding proposal, the formal gift (Guo Da Li) will be sent by the groom to confirm the acceptance of the marriage.
5. An auspicious date is selected for the wedding.
6. The day of the traditional wedding ceremony.

Now-a-days in a modern wedding, most Chinese families no longer adhere to the sending of the above Three (3) letters. Furthermore, not all the six-steps or etiquettes may be followed:-

1. More often, couples know each other through schooling, work-place or other social gatherings. Less dependent on family match-makers. Although other type of match-making is becoming popular e.g. SDU, internet match-making websites.
2. Some modern families e.g Chinese Christians have done away with the checking and exchanging of the Bride & Groom's date of birth-dates. They may also turn to a geomancer to look at favourable dates.
3. Nowadays, if both parties (brides & groom's) are agreeable with the wedding, they may have a formal meeting to discuss on what type of formal gifts the bride's side would like to have and also to discuss the amount of wedding tables that will be allocated by the groom's side to the bride's family side. For example the bride's side may request for 40 wedding tables for the bride's family. Some

bride's family may even “chip-in” or may not even want to burden the groom's side with added finances. It all depends!

4. More or less auspicious date is selected for the wedding.
5. Nowadays, there is the formal wedding at the Registry of Marriage for many Chinese followed by the Traditional Wedding Ceremony or for Christians or Catholics, a formal wedding at a church.

B. Preparation of Wedding

i. Setting up the Bridal Bed (壓床 An Chuan)

Traditionally, a good/auspicious date is selected to move the bridal bed into the right place. Here, usually a man that has good or reasonable fortune (health and money) will help to setup/position the bridal bed. Afterwards, the bed will be left untouched until the day of the wedding. This procedure is often or usually done a few weeks before the actual wedding date.

After the bed has been moved to it's right place, a MALE healthy child e.g. relative's son will be invited to lie and roll over the bed to signify fertility and the hope that the couple will have a MALE son. Red beans/green beans, lychee, dates, peanuts, oranges and other fruits are often scattered onto the bed. Usually, the types of offerings depends on the season and varies from different regions and dialect groups.

This practiced is still done during modern times. The only difference is that this procedure is done sometimes even on the eve or day before the wedding or on the same day of the sending the formal gifts (过大礼 Guo Da Li) or even a few weeks prior to Guo Da Li. Nowadays, so long as this is done, there is no issue as to doing it on a specific date.

Ideally, a new bed is used. However, we can understand that some couples may not be able to afford to buy a new bed e.g. King or queen sized bed. Thus, if really no choice then, an existing bed can be used. However, I am sure the couples should be able to afford new linen. Avoid two single beds joined together. If an existing bed is used, try to shift it slightly away from it's original position. (Nice-to-have).

ii. Sending Formal Gifts (过大礼 Guo Da Li)

Traditionally, the groom will send the bride's gifts as requested by the Bride's family. The monetary and jewelry gifts may also be negotiated upon. For example, the Teochew dialect group may request for four (4) types of gold...

The groom's family will usually present gifts such as dragon and phoenix (long-feng) bridal cakes, wine, sugar / sweets, livestock meat etc. The bride's family will usually

distribute the bridal cakes to friends and relatives. Whole suckling pigs are often offered to the bride's family.

In modern day, this is still practiced except that the type of gifts presented may differ.

Nowadays, both the initial gifts and formal gifts are often sent on the same day, rather than on two separate events. Also, modern day gifts may include dried seafood, canned food rather than livestock for practical reasons.

As for the monetary gifts and/or jewelry, the groom will either pay a certain amount or offer to pay for the cost of the wedding. The negotiations will also take place on the number of tables for the wedding banquet. Sometimes, the bride side may also pay for some of the cost if the groom cannot afford it. Anyway, these will be discussed between the family until both sides need not necessary be happy (but heh! At least) all the terms are clearly agreed upon.

iii. Combing of the Bride's Hair (上头 Shang Tou)

Traditionally, for some Chinese dialect group, at the dawn of the wedding day or the night before the wedding, the bride will be bathed in water added with pameló, lime leaves etc to cleanse the body. She will put on new clothes. Then she will sit before a set of long-feng (dragon and phoenix) candles to have her hair combed. A woman that has enjoyed reasonable good fortune in life; will help comb her hair. The act of combing the bride's hair is to symbolize a long and lasting marriage. As she comb the hair she will usually say the following:-

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1 st combing represents: | 一梳梳到尾
yì shūshūdàowěi
= from start of marriage until the end |
| 2 nd combing represents: | 二梳梳到白髮齊眉
èr shūshūdàobái fà qí méi
= harmonious relationship until old age |
| 3 rd combing represents: | 三梳梳到兒孫滿地
sānshūshūdào ér sūnmǎn de
= will have many sons and grandsons everywhere
(nowadays daughters & granddaughters also can...) |

四梳梳到四條銀筍盡標齊

4th combing represents: **sì shūshūdào sì tiáoyínsǔnjìnbīāo qí**
= monetary wealth and for a long and lasting marriage.

Traditionally, the bride and groom will be wearing red. And on the wedding day, the bride will also be covered with a red silk veil or a curtain of beads hung from the bridal crown.

In the very old days, the groom also have a similar hair combing procedure, but this is no longer practiced anymore.

In our modern day practice, many brides follow the western tradition of wearing white (symbolizing purity) usually for photo taking and almost the entire day. However, for some, who may hold an evening wedding, the bride may first wear her white wedding dress and mid-way during the dinner, change to a “lovely” red dress. This really depends on the individual family. Some modern couples even skip this step altogether.

iv. **Crowning the Groom**

Traditionally, the groom will be dressed in a long gown, with red shoes and red silk sash with a silk ball on his shoulder. The groom will kneel at the family altar, while his elder/father placed a crown decorated with cypress leaves on his head.

The groom will pray and pay respect to the GODs of the Heaven and Earth to ask for their blessings. Then his elder/father will remove the silk ball from the sash and place on top of the bridal sedan chair. He will be ready to set-off to the bride's home.

In modern day, it is uncommon to see the groom wearing all red. Nowadays, the groom will often wear a formal western attire. And often following western traditions, both the bride and bridegroom have their bride's maid and respective best-man.

C. Wedding Day Activities

i. The Groom fetching the Bride

Traditionally, groom will send a bridal sedan chair/bridal carriage to pick up the bride. A procession of musicians to play wedding music all the way and gifts will also be brought to the bride's family. The procession may be also accompanied by a male child/or a group of childrens to signify future sons. In many instances a lion dance procession and attendants with lanterns and banners will accompany the procession.

In modern day, the groom will prepare a wedding car to pick up the bride. The groom and groomsman will decorate the car before it is ready for use. When the car arrives, a male child will be assigned to open the door for the groom to come down. (Really, if no male child last resort... a girl also can lah!) And before the groom actually can enter the house, he will be blocked by the bride's family or friends who will not surrender the bride so – fast!. Often, offers of red packet and a series of tasks/questions have to be fulfilled to the bride's friends before he is allowed to enter the house to fetch the bride.

In some cases, the groom will be invited to have some food (snacks) with the bride's family. Sometimes, he may be offered a pair of chopsticks and two wine goblets wrapped in red paper. Some grooms may also be offered sweet longan tea, two hard-boiled eggs and transparent noodles. These are to symbolize that the groom is happy and contented to receive the bride.

Some groom may also have to drink a soup of soft-boiled eggs, where the groom is supposed to break the yolk. This is symbolic of the bride having to break her ties with her family.

For many modern Chinese, the couple may hold the tea ceremony for the bride's family. The bride's parents will be served first followed by other relatives. Just as in the tea ceremony at groom's house which I have described below.

ii. Before Bride leaves the House

Traditionally, when the groom arrives at the bride's house, a woman that has enjoyed relatively good luck (大妗姐 da jin jie) may be employed to escort/carry the bride on her back into the sedan chair/carriage. It is said that the bride's feet cannot touch the ground until she arrived at the groom's house.

The bride's maid (伴娘 must be unwed girl) assigned to hold a red umbrella to shield the bride from the sun/ sky light, to symbolize bringing lots of children to the groom's family. A third assistant may be engaged to sprinkle rice on sedan chair to prevent chickens from pecking the bride. Before the bride sits on the bridal sedan, she must thank her relatives sending her off by bowing to them.

Firecrackers may also be lighted and set-off to scare evil spirits while, the bride leaves her family's home. Those who are considered to have incompatible horoscopes are not allowed to accompany the bride to the groom's home.

In modern day, after the groom has pick up the bride and is ready to leave. An assistant (e.g. Bride's maid) not necessary that of a lady of good fortune, will use the red umbrella to usher the bride into the wedding car. This red umbrella is passed on

to the groom's car for the groom's side to usher the bride out of the car when they reach the groom's house. Many modern families nowadays may skip this red umbrella or rice throwing.

iii. Arrival at the Groom's House

In the past, once the procession reached the groom's house, firecrackers will be set-off to frighten away evil spirits again. And a red mat/carpet was placed before the sedan chair for the bride to dismount. The bride was required to step over a lit charcoal stove before entering the house. However, avoid having her clothing catch fire! The act of stepping over fire is meant to "cleanse" her which literally means to burn away evil influence and ward-off back-luck.

Like the western counter-part, after the rituals are completed, the groom could finally raise the red scarf to view the bride's face for the tea ceremony.

In modern day, especially the Cantonese dialect group may still practise crossing over the lighted charcoal stove. Nowadays, the red umbrella may still be used to usher the bride from the car to the house.

iv. Wedding & Tea Ceremony at the Groom's House (拜堂 bai tang /奉茶 feng cha)

After the bride arrived at the groom's house, the couple will pay homage (respect) to the heaven and earth. They will then worship the ancestors. And the bride and groom will also bow to each other.

Finally, tea with two lotus seeds or red dates will be offered to groom's parents. After which, they will serve tea to the other relatives of the groom's family according to the seniority. The more senior/elderly relatives who are served tea will present the groom & bride with red packets or a bridal jewelry. The younger relatives/children that are younger than the bride & groom, will in turn serve tea to the bride & groom and receive a red packet. This is generally practiced in both traditional and modern tea ceremony.

v. Wedding Banquet (结婚宴席 Jie Hun Yan Xi)

Traditionally, to celebrate the marriage, the groom's family will throw a wedding feast for their respective friends and families. The bride's family may also throw their own wedding feast separate from the groom. How grand or large depends on how much they can afford. There can be a single feast or a many feast up-to 7 days if necessary. However, most will hold only one single feasts. If multiple feasts are held, the wedding feasts held on the actual day of the wedding that is most important. And that

would be the day where friends & relatives will witness the union of the couple.

In modern day, a wedding ceremony is held at restaurant or hotel usually on the same day as the tea ceremony in the evening to witness the union of the couples. Usually, a list will be prepared for all the guests that will be attending, and the various family members will be assigned to the first few tables for each side of the family, followed by the friends.

vi. The Wedding/Nuptial/Bridal Chamber (洞房 Dong Fang)

Traditionally, after the ceremony, the couples were led to the bridal chamber. Some bridal wine are poured into couple's cup that is linked together by a red thread. The bride and groom will take a few sips before they exchange cup and drink the rest down. This is to signify unit of the couples.

On this day, the bed chamber may be opened to visitors to allow friends to tease/play tricks (Nao Dong Fang) on the couples.

In the modern day, after the wedding banquet, the bride and groom will spend the night at the hotel suite for the consummation process. And often, afterwards take a honeymoon holiday together.

D. Post Wedding Day Activities

i. Day after the Wedding

Traditionally, the bride wakes up early to honor the ancestors and is formally introduced to the groom's relatives and friends.

In modern day, this is no longer followed. As during the tea ceremony, the bride will be introduced to the various relatives.

ii. Bride returning home after 3 days (三朝回門 San Chao Hui Men)

Traditionally, three days after the wedding, the bride will return home to her family to be considered as a guest. The bride cannot stay overnight. The bride will bring along a pair of roasted pig, two boxes of cakes, two bottle of wine, two candles, two chicken, shen cai, and gifts for the family. The groom may or may not accompany the bride. The bride's family will return parts of the gifts as a courtesy.

In modern day, the bride will still return home on the 3rd day. However, now-a-days the bride may or may not need to bring back any gifts for the family. Often, they may away on their honeymoon overseas.

These are the most of common wedding practises. How much is followed today really depends on the various Chinese families and dialect groups. It is quite common for most Chinese modern weddings to retain only the tea ceremony and wedding banquet. Hope you find some of the information under this article useful to you or your family, friends who will be preparing their wedding!

Warmest Regards

Robert Lee

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