

Commodified Weddings: Brides as ‘Objects’ in Japanese Women’s Magazines

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Abstract

Japanese women’s magazines concerned with weddings tend to portray brides as objects in the production of a commodity. In this article, an analysis is made of a popular women’s magazine featuring marriage and weddings. An attempt will be made to clarify whether the magazine’s images of womanhood empower brides to create different wedding alternatives. Theories of gendered nationalism and commodified weddings will be used as the methodology for analysis.

Key words

commodified lifestyles, commercial wedding parlors, bridal products, objectification of brides, gendered nationalism

Overview

As the patterns of daily life in Japan are increasingly dominated by consumption, virtually nothing is left untouched. Even weddings have become increasingly commodified as they have moved away from the home and community. While the tendency toward the commodification of weddings is also present in the West, it appears to be more advanced in Japan. Today, most Japanese weddings are held in commercialized settings such as wedding parlors, hotels, public meeting halls, and churches. These weddings combine elements of Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity without serious religious commitment in an ostensibly religious ceremony. In this article, a case study of a women’s wedding magazine will serve as the basis for analyzing the trend toward the commodification of weddings and its effect on the bride’s choice of wedding alternatives.

Methodology

Brian McVeigh’s theory of gendered nationalism (2004) and Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni’s theory of the Japanese commercial wedding (1997) will be used as the basis for magazine

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analysis in this article.

(1) Gendered Nationalism

The concept of gendered nationalism was developed by Brian McVeigh. Gendered nationalism can be described as the linkage of the 'good wife, wise mother' (良妻賢母) ideology with the national identity of Japanese women. Gendered nationalism is part of McVeigh's theory of contemporary Japanese nationalism. That theory posits that "any given 'nationalism' is actually a vast array of 'nationalisms' that interconnect, overlap, and resonate as well as collide, clash, and compete with each other" (2004, p. 4). He cites sixteen Japanese nationalisms; militarist, imperial, state, economic, education, ethnic, linguistic, aesthetic, gendered, religious, anti-war, populist, and fundamentalist (2004, p. 5). McVeigh explains that there is a linkage between self, society, and state in Japan which is woven into these diverse forms of nationalism. The consequence for gender relations is that the 'good wife, wise mother' ideology has been able to persist as the core of gendered nationalism; "a politicized and managed identity deeply implicated in and reproduced by patriarchy, nation-ness, stateness, and capitalist economic nationalism" (2004, p. 219). Although there are laws supporting equal opportunity for women, social realities in Japan's educational and occupational institutions "reveal that this form of gendered nationalism is still alive" (2004, p. 219).

Currently, the state's unofficial endorsement of the 'good wife, wise mother' ideology is evident in the debate about the declining birthrate. Instead of questioning whether it is necessary to restore the birthrate to replacement levels, state policies assume that the nation's women must bear more children (Takahashi, 2005).

The utility of McVeigh's theory for an analysis of women's wedding magazines is that the state's traditional concepts of gendered nationalism can be placed in the self. Furthermore, wedding magazines can function as a vehicle for disseminating those concepts. Although not officially condoned, the gendered ideology of 'good wife, wise mother' is still reproduced in a variety of state institutions - especially education (McVeigh, 2002). While some scholars consider the 'good wife, wise mother' ideology an anachronism, there is "still the continuing hold of 'good wife, wise mother' ideology which encourages gendered bifurcation within education and shapes women's perceptions, employers' demands, and societal expectations" (McVeigh, 2004, p. 238). It has been lodged within the collective social subconscious since the Meiji period. Conformity to the expectations of authority is an important social value and it penetrates deep within the ideology of 'good wife, wise mother.' Consequently, conscious challenges to this ideology must confront the subliminal messages about conforming to authority and traditional notions of femininity.

(2) Commodified Weddings

Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni theorizes contemporary weddings as a production process which manufactures the Japanese bride as a “packaged product.” She explains that the Japanese ceremonial occasions industry has commodified weddings to such an extent that the typical Japanese wedding has been transformed from a community based activity into a manufacturing process that involves a “whole range of subsidiary businesses” (1997, p. 108). A family affair has become the main ‘object’ of a manufacturing process. Japan’s contemporary consumer culture has supplanted the family and community as the primary resource for constructing the meaning systems for weddings and marriage.

In women’s wedding magazines, the objectification of the bride occurs in at least three ways. First, the magazines contribute to sustaining the commodified lifestyle which enables status conscious families to use the wedding as an opportunity for conspicuous displays of wealth. As noted by Harald Fuess (2004), the use of weddings for displays of extravagance became apparent in the 1980s at the peak of Japan’s overall economic prosperity. “The costs of marriage often exceeded two years of the average groom’s income” (Fuess, 2004, p. 155). The bride becomes an object for those families who are motivated to portray themselves with images of expense and extravagance. The bride’s role is crucial for obtaining status recognition. Goldstein-Gidoni finds that change in preference from wedding parlors to hotels during the late 1980s was merely because hotel weddings are known to be more expensive: “a question of image rather than of prices per se” (1997, p. 45). As a magazine devoted to weddings, *Kansai Zeksi* depends on the bride-to-be to function in this object role since a large number of pages are about the social image of an expensive wedding. In that sense, the magazine serves as an encyclopedic reference in “the ongoing search for increasingly expensive and elegant venues for weddings” (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1997, p. 44).

A second way in which brides are treated as objects occurs during the wedding itself. For the bride, the wedding day can be arduous rather than joyful. There are long periods of physical discomfort during the portion of the wedding when Japanese attire is worn. The wedding kimono and wig are heavy. But the bride as object is expected to pose for innumerable photographs in a manner which is doll-like, “standing in a somewhat frozen position for quite a long time” (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1997, p. 20). Women’s magazines impress on the prospective bride that wedding photography is the only way to immortalize the wedding.

Ironically, it is the bride’s own mother and other women who will be the first to reprimand her for complaining about physical discomfort. The bride is expected to endure. Yet those same women who are criticizing the bride suffered similar discomfort and treatment as an object during their own weddings. Nevertheless, they seem

oblivious to their collaboration in perpetuating the oppression of women by encouraging their daughter's compliance. Moreover, they tend to reflect nostalgically about strictness and regimen of former times. Self-induced historical amnesia permits them to conveniently gloss over the abuses they suffered so that they inadvertently perpetuate the oppressiveness of contemporary weddings.

A third way in which the wedding production objectifies the bride is in her treatment as a passive object. Magazines encourage the passive characteristic of the bridal role as it is routinely depicted in wedding photos and publications about bridal attire. "This passive and object-like role seems to be generally accepted by the brides themselves, who tend to become like automatons from the moment the make-up process begins" (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1997, p. 122). Rather than discuss alternative wedding possibilities, magazines mostly encourage the brides to submit themselves to the bridal role which has been determined by the public event wedding venues. The wedding venues exist to make profits and the production of brides is the mainstay of their commercial operations. The resultant ideological oppression of the bride from assuming an object-like role is generally not questioned by the wedding magazines nor the wedding production venues.

Analysis of *Kansai Zeksi*

An issue from *Kansai Zeksi 2006* has been chosen since that was the year in which the second amendment to the EEOL (Equal Employment Opportunity Law) was made, which is one of the most important legal measures affecting Japanese women. The first issue of *Kansai Zeksi* was published on May 24, 1995 by Recruit as a source of bridal products and services. The title appears in katakana with the pronunciation "zekushi" but its romanized version is unconventional and written with an accent mark over the 'e,' 'k' for 'ku,' and 'si' rather than the more common 'shi.' The magazine is issued monthly and is intended for a Kansai region readership. It combines expository material with an abundance of photos.

The contents include introductions to wedding parlors and hotel weddings. In addition, there are advertisements for wedding resorts, bridal products, and bridal fairs. There is also considerable effort given to "instruction" about various aspects of weddings. The average number of pages for a monthly issue is about 600. It is published using high grade glossy paper, making it substantially heavier than other women's magazines. Consequently, it appears encyclopedic which contributes to the image of expertise conveyed by the ceremonial occasions industry.

Kansai Zeksi January 2006, Number 127

"Tell me about 'the things which everybody else chooses' for weddings nowadays!" (今どきの結婚式, みんなが選んでいるもの教えて)

This issue of the magazine is relevant to an analysis of images of contemporary womanhood for its expression of the hegemony of homogeneity (Befu, 2001) in treating the bride as product. There is an abundance of small photos, interspersed with animated cartoons and their diminutive captions. The article attracts the readers' attention with its claim that it can tell us about what others are doing, using as many as forty items. Those items include the wedding venue, the wedding dress, rings, and bouquets. There appears to be an assumption that readers must be taught Japanese femininity. Here, the hidden message is that the teachings are correct because everybody is following them.

This issue's opening paragraph (page 72) admonishes the reader to "study seriously" (しっかり勉強して) its contents in order to avoid being called out of date by everyone else. The implication of shaming by the watchful eyes of society is a frequently used tactic in Japanese women's magazines and throughout society to extract desired behaviors. The juxtaposition of 'out of date' with 'nowadays' occurs frequently in this issue of *Kansai Zeksi* and is apparent in the passage, "Marriage preparations nowadays... value the family during the (wedding) preparations as well as on the (wedding) day!" (今どきの会場選びは...準備中も当日の家族を大事にしている). The instructional purpose is to teach the necessary steps for obtaining a "heartwarming trend" from the very first meeting with the groom's parents. Readers are instructed about how to give the parents peace of mind by demonstrating a steadfast and meticulous attitude toward advance preparations for the wedding. Subsequent explanations, in four progressively diminutive scripts, further define what is encompassed by "advance preparations."

The magazine alludes to the common difficulty of conversation between the families. Thus, it is extremely important to do advance research into the "personal characteristics" and "hobbies" of the parents. That will ensure the creation of harmony, mood, and smooth conversation. There is also instruction about the correct gift to give when visiting the parents as well as advice about the timing of its presentation. One should present this gift at the precise moment of entering the house. A further admonition concerns clothing. Women must exercise the utmost care in clothing choices when visiting the groom's parents. They should wear either a one-piece dress or suit, and clearly demonstrate thought about seasonal appropriateness. Furthermore, readers are advised not to wear boots that are not easily removable before entering the house.

Summary

Kansai Zeksi is a women's magazine ostensibly created for the bride-to-be. However, the magazine issue examined above provides extensive instructional advice which imposes arbitrary judgments on the readership. The use of instructions and rules deepen the hegemony of homogeneity about what should constitute the image of the Japanese bride. In that sense, this issue of the magazine cannot be said to empower

brides who might want to use the magazine's information to create radically different wedding alternatives. Instead, there is a repeated pattern of using an abundance of commodified objects to create a bridal image that suits the wedding producers. That has the effect of reducing the bride to functioning as a product in a wedding production.

The magazine encourages the elaboration of themes of gendered nationalism which are consistent with McVeigh's theory of state ideology about women as the repositories of essential Japaneseness. That is symbolized by the Western white wedding dress which is part of the ongoing negotiation of Japaneseness using recreated elements of the West in a distinctly Japanese way (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1997, p. 153). The magazine's treatment of the wedding as a consumer product portrays that negotiation of contemporary Japanese feminine identity as being enmeshed in the commodified lifestyle.

Kansai Zeksi enables us to look behind the intricacies of wedding production and glimpse the hidden message given to brides. Meticulous instructions explain how to appear as the perfect product. The bride must adhere to the precise prescriptions of the wedding producers or she might be viewed by wider society as somehow flawed and defective. But the readers' use of the wedding magazine also suggest that women collaborate in their treatment as 'objects' of the wedding production process when they acquiesce to the producers' expectations.

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