

**UNDERSTANDING MARRIAGE:
CHINESE WEDDINGS IN SINGAPORE**

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NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

2011

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B.Soc.Sc. (Hons.), NUS

A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR

**THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

2011

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It took me close to two years to complete this thesis, and this journey would not have been possible without the assistance, guidance and inspiration of several individuals who in some way or another extended their valuable assistance.

First and foremost, my utmost gratitude and appreciation to my supervisor, Associate Professor Maribeth Erb, whose guidance, patience and support I will never forget. Thank you so much for keeping me on track throughout the entire course. The time and effort you spent on developing my understanding on the subject and on correcting my work definitely made this thesis a better piece of work.

To my family, words can't convey how much I appreciate your support as I hurdle all the obstacles along the way. Thank you for supporting my decision to leave my full-time job to concentrate on the preparation and completion of this thesis.

To my friends and ex-colleagues, thank you for granting me interviews, cheering me on when the road became bumpy, and for the show of concern. Also, a special thanks to *Avenue 8*, *FPIX Productions*, *Golden Happiness*, *Portraits*, *Raymond Phang Photography*, *The Wedding Present*, *Shuang Xi Le*, *Wedding Concierge*, *White Weddings*, *World of Fortune* and *Yellow B Photography* for taking the time to provide me with the information I require despite your busy schedule.

Last but not least, I wish to offer my regards to all of those who supported me in one way or another throughout this project. Thanks for journeying with me!

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SUMMARY

Being one of the key points in the ceremonial life of an individual, wedding ceremonies are often lengthy elaborate and colorful affairs replete with many symbolic meanings. This thesis looks at the changing ways that people have come to think about marriage in Singapore, by examining how the Chinese wedding (traditionally referred to as “Red Affairs”) has come to be executed and negotiated across time. It adopts Peter Riviere’s (1971) argument that there is no single definition of marriage. Marriage plays a different role with the changing social landscape of a particular group or community. It is suggested that people negotiate what marriage means to them through the rites they choose to celebrate and construct it. Ritual is subjected to changes and continuities, and is negotiated to reflect the key cultural values, social needs as well as expectations of a particular social group at a given time. Marriage has moved from being a family oriented to an individual and state oriented institution; beyond just being a family affair complete with customary ceremonial celebrations that symbolize a “bundle of rights” negotiated and conferred upon its adherents, the formation of marriage amongst the Chinese in modern Singapore has come to rest upon ideas such as the public display of the married couple as well as the beginning of a relationship between two individuals.

The concept of “archive” is central to this thesis. Following Jacques Derrida (1996), this thesis suggests that the archive is a “place” and a repository of cultural production which individuals draw upon in their everyday life. It is considered as a particular form that creates and preserves tradition. Besides the subjective nature wherein the couple negotiates behaviors, consumptions and interactions with others while drawing on “archives”, this thesis considers how various discourses or practices shape this negotiation. It offers a glimpse as to how these negotiations link with one’s

relationship with the past, the present and the future, as well as with ideas of the self, the family and the perfect wedding today.

Through the lens of the wedding preparation, performance, and the “archiving” of the event, we get a glimpse of the fundamental change in the way young people think about themselves today in comparison to the earlier generations. Modern wedding ideals and rituals are created. A flurry of activities is feeding into people’s desire to put on a display of themselves through their weddings. The boundaries of archives have widened alongside technological advancements and changing notions of marriage – besides the physical archive (wedding albums), the electronic archive is fast becoming a documentation of the wedding. This thesis examines new media and photographs as some of the new rites associated with contemporary weddings. Drawing on Nick Couldry’s (2004) reference to the “celebrification” and celebrity culture that underlie media rituals, it is put forward that individuals are wooed to make a spectacle of themselves, and that there is an increasing desire to be a public personality.

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CHAPTER 1

CONTEMPORARY RED AFFAIRS

Weddings: Interrogating the Local and the Global

The People's Action Party (PAP) government of Singapore, for a variety of political reasons¹, emphasizes the family as the backbone of society; for this reason the government is continually exerting pressure on Singaporeans to marry and procreate. However delayed marriage, a rise in singlehood, continuing decline in fertility and fears of an aging population in recent years, has meant that the question of marriage has increasingly become a matter of public concern. Recognizing the difficulty for young working adults to find time to socialize and date, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his 2008 National Day rally speech encouraged singles to take the first step and make time to meet new friends and join dating agencies (Prime Minister's Office Singapore, 2008). Subsequently in his Committee of Supply 2010 speech, then Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng shifted the burden of the decreasing fertility rate onto the shoulders of singles, claiming the government had done its fair share to support childbirth (*Straits Times*, 4 March 2010). Though recognizing marriage and parenthood as being intrinsically personal decisions, he still saw the problem of low fertility and a decreasing rate of marriage as a national problem, and the burden to "solve" it therefore lay on the shoulders of the young. Thus, the increasing "political pressure" to marry has resulted in an ideological push and a flurry of activities to woo young people towards marriage. This can be seen in the proliferation of state-endorsed dating services and activities, as well as numerous wedding exhibitions with enticing wedding packages on display designed to perpetuate a notion of romance, the beauty of a perfect wedding and a happy

¹ These reasons include fear of growing dependency on government largesse and rejection of the idea of a "welfare state".

marriage. The issue of marriage is therefore of paramount importance to the modern city-state of Singapore.

With the national spotlight on marriage and fertility, it is therefore time to carefully consider what marriage has come to mean in contemporary Singapore. Fifty years ago, the celebrated anthropologist Edmund Leach (1961) argued that marriage is a “bundle of rights”, which may have very different configurations in different societies; it is necessary to recognize that these “bundle of rights” may also change in any given society across time. Though at one time in Singapore the transfer of rights over child bearing women, and the exchanges of various forms of property between negotiating affines, may have been the primary concerns in contracting a marriage, in contemporary Singapore the couple’s relationship and their rights as individuals have become much more paramount to the way the young and the old negotiate their way through the creation of this important relationship.

In recent years, various scholars have interrogated the influence of the state in shaping Singapore society, and how this influence is increasingly being undermined by various factors of globalization. Many arguments still emphasize the role of the state, for example how ideas of citizenship have been shaped through the teaching of social studies in secondary school, (Sim (2011), or how different state regulations on the family uphold patriarchal practices Chan (2000). While globalization has always been a key tenet in Singapore macro-discourses, a number of existing works have pointed to glocalization, a social process that contextualizes the local in the global and vice-versa (Robertson 1995). For example Pugsley (2010) considered how, in an attempt to resonate with readers and to appease the state, the Singapore For Him Magazine (FHM) has undergone particular “localisation processes”, where the transnational magazine has “subtly shifted Western notions of masculinity to

encompass the new global masculinity of urban, professional, Singaporean males” (Pugsley 2010, p. 171). In a similar vein, Alsagoff points to the dualistic role of English in Singapore, both as a global and local language, suggesting that “this duality is consistent with the cultural identity of Singaporeans who negotiate fluidly between two divergent orientations – that of the global citizen and the local Singaporean” (2010, p. 376). Thus, in this thesis, I want to explore the unique negotiation of cultural orientations increasingly found in Singapore, between the local and the global. It is argued that wedding rituals offer glimpses of the simultaneity of the global and the local, since while weddings draw upon the representation of a specific cultural identity, at the same time actors use weddings in their attempt to showcase themselves increasingly as global citizens.

My concern in this thesis, then, is to give some consideration to the changing ways that people have come to think about marriage in Singapore, and how this change gives us some insights into contemporary Singapore society. Given that this is a big topic, my lens through which to do this will be a very specific one, that is the Chinese wedding, and the different ways that it has been executed and negotiated over the past 80 or so years. My argument is this: some of what people think about marriage can be reflected through the rites they choose to celebrate it, and construct it. The dramatic changes that have taken place in Singapore society over the past century mean that what marriage rites mean, and which ones are chosen to be performed, entail a great deal of negotiation today. I have found that there are interesting contrasts between wedding rites during the colonial era and those in more recent decades; these rites and their contrasts lend insights to how actors think about their roles in both family and society, as well as their ideas of marriage. This thesis then examines Chinese wedding rites as one way that social actors contend with the

construction of the meaning of marriage in contemporary Singapore. The ambivalence or tensions negotiated by different actors is made more problematic today by the communication forms that evolved out of the growth and development of modern institutions, as well as the plethora of social and cultural elements available in determining one's identity performance in society.

Red Affairs

Weddings in Chinese culture are referred to as “red affairs”. The expression “red affair” developed because red symbolises happiness and joy and has always been used in wedding decorations (Lang 1946, p. 36). Growing up in a “traditional” Chinese family in a multi-religious society, I have always been fascinated with Chinese religion, cultural values and norms; however, it was the first-hand encounter with the complexities behind the ceremonial wedding affair of a close relative that prompted my interest in the meaning of wedding rites to contemporary Singaporean Chinese. Being one of the key points in the ceremonial life of an individual, wedding ceremonies are often lengthy, elaborate affairs; thus to produce the final “wedding product”, main social actors involved in this performance continually bargain and compromise among themselves.

Examining the changing cultural and social significance of the wedding in Britain, Sharon Boden contended that the event becomes “a carefully negotiated performance organized by the bride, aided by the industry, given meaning by the culture and kept at a secure distance from the unwanted influences of other involved parties” (2003, p. 70). This thesis utilizes Boden's view and contends that the Singaporean Chinese bride and groom carefully engage in negotiations on the consumption of wedding choices, both with each other, and in their interaction with

others, in order to create an occasion which is meaningful to them. What do these rites mean, who are the most significant actors in these rites, and what types of negotiations are involved in contemporary Singaporean Chinese weddings? It is clear that modern weddings are different from the past, where the celebrations were controlled by the couple's parents and members of the older generation and the rites and displays at weddings were carried out to uphold the "face" of the families involved. The contemporary wedding, on the other hand, has become progressively significant as "an occasion chosen by brides and grooms, prepared and performed by and for each other" (Boden 2003, p. 17). Although "tradition" continues to play an important part in the wedding, the celebrations that are performed connect traditions with something that is totally the couple's own. Writing about how the "generation me"² in America was bending wedding traditions, Jean Twenge (2006) suggested that weddings were no longer about rules, but about individual expression. Negotiations in contemporary weddings hence involve choosing between a whole range of different possibilities, which I will refer to in this thesis as "archives", upon which the couple and relatives draw to construct their desired wedding. These "archives" are the "stock" of cultural and social practices; there are those considered to be traditional, both in the context of ancient Chinese ritual, and accumulated Singaporean wedding customs, as well as an array of modern possibilities opened up by access to global fashion and taste and other technological changes in contemporary Singapore. From these "archives" rituals of the present are constructed to build a meaningful wedding performance that helps us to understand something about what marriage has come to mean for contemporary Singaporeans.

² Twenge (2006) considered Gen-X and Y – those born after 1970, under the taxonomy "GenMe".

Interpretive Framework

C. Wright Mill's concept of the sociological imagination encourages us to be aware of the connection between biography and history (Mills 1959, quoted in Kaufman 1997). Following the view that weddings are negotiated performances subject to personal biographies and socio-cultural historical contexts, this thesis shall use insights from symbolic interactionism, and focus on the subjective meanings that actors give to their actions and exchanges. Amongst other things, symbolic interactionism highlights that the social world is a dialectic web in which social action and interaction are always interpretive processes mediated by symbols and meanings. The values and behaviors of individuals do not occur in a vacuum. Instead, "these values and behaviors are situated and consequently influenced by their particular time and space" (Kaufman 1997, p. 309). Equipped with the ability to handle meanings and symbols, individuals continually interpret and adjust their behavior to the actions of other actors. To the symbolic interactionist, actors are active participants who in constructing their social world have at least some autonomy in making choices, playing roles and negotiating the action they undertake during social interaction. Social relations remain in constant flux due to negotiation among members of society.

The concept of the self is of substantial concern in symbolic interactionism. Such an approach posits that sociological processes and events revolve around the self (Rock 1979, quoted in Ritzer 1983/1988, p. 185). Considered one of the founders of symbolic interactionism, George Herbert Mead posited that the self is a social process with two phases – *me*, social constraints within the self, and *I*, the spontaneous self. His work highlights the reflective and reflexive nature of the self in how persons see themselves as both the actor and subject. Building on Mead's discussion of the tension between *me* and *I*, Erving Goffman set forth a "crucial discrepancy between

our all-too-human selves and our socialized selves” (Goffman 1959, p. 56). Tension arises with the difference between the expectations of society and what actors want to do spontaneously. In order to uphold a stable self-image, actors perform for their social audiences (Ritzer 1983/1988). With this emphasis on performance, Goffman concentrated on the social construction of the self as a product of dramatic performances. I suggest that the wedding is a dramatic performance, par excellence, and become a place, I argue, where actors can perform the selves they hope to be. Using the idea of performance allows an examination of the self-image or wedding experience the bridal couple seeks to depict and the struggles they face negotiating time and changing ideas of the self, the family and the perfect wedding in contemporary Singapore.

To fulfil societal and familial expectations, everyone presents one’s self through the performance of roles. Peter Berger defines a role as “a typified response to a typified expectation” (1963, p. 95). He contends that “The structures of society become the structures of our own consciousness. Society does not only stop at the surface of our skins. Society penetrates us as much as it envelops us,” (Berger 1963, p. 121). The fundamental typology behind roles and the identity, thought and emotions of individuals are outlined by society; interaction with social structures shapes an individual’s notions of reality. In a similar way, Geoffrey Benjamin (1988) posits that the nation-state has an “unseen presence” in interfering in the life of the individual. I shall draw also from Peter Berger and Geoffrey Benjamin in my argument here, and suggest that the Singapore state took an active role in shaping different (yet sometimes paradoxical) discourses and representations of such aspects of peoples’ lives such as ethnicity, gender, family, marriage and procreation. Different cultural constructions and expectations about these different ideas and roles,

as they have been influenced by the state and varying cultural notions, have come to be performed and negotiated in different ways during weddings.

In addition to symbolic interactionism, this thesis will draw on post-structuralism. In his study of symbolic interactionism, post-structuralism and the racial subject, Norman Denzin (2001) posited that the interactionist and post-structuralist need one another. On its own, neither theory is adequate to explain the complexities that take place within the social world. However, when used together, the interactionist's inquiry at the level of the self and the interactional order is enhanced with the post-structuralist's move between textual representations, speech acts and lived experience (Denzin 2001). In *Of Grammatology* (1976), Jacques Derrida asserted that "there is nothing outside the text". Denzin (1992), who engaged in a politics of interpretation of symbolic interactionism, argued that a "text" is "any printed, visual, oral or auditory production that is available for reading, viewing, or hearing" (p. 32). This, therefore, includes ritual events, narrated memories of those events, photographs and the like. The meaning of a "text" is always open-ended and interactional. There is therefore a need to deconstruct and explore how it is constructed and given meaning by its author (Denzin 1992). The inclusion of both symbolic interactionism and post-structuralism will thus help me to make sense of how interacting individuals connect their marriage experiences to different texts and sources of meanings.

Methodology

This thesis seeks to understand negotiation and meaning creation in contemporary Chinese weddings through a micro-sociological analysis. Therefore the use of qualitative research methods, such as open-ended, semi-structured, in-depth

interviews was considered most apt as they facilitate “an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman 2006, p. 9). In addition to talk, text found via the World Wide Web and conventional media were also collected and analyzed. As Martin Bauer contended, texts are “about people’s thoughts, feelings, memories, plans and arguments, and are sometimes more telling than their authors realize” (2000, p. 132). The use of participant observation was also essential, where possible, since this could generate a rich source of firsthand knowledge about weddings.

Chinese wedding celebrations consist of numerous rites which are potentially performed over an extended period of time. Unfortunately I did not have the opportunity to follow all the rites performed by any given couple; I had some difficulties finding weddings to attend, and being given access to follow the couple throughout the wedding day itself. When I did have the chance to attend wedding rites, permission was sought, and the bridal couples understood that I was a researcher. All together I observed five church weddings, two “traditional” wedding banquets and managed to follow the tea ceremony and gate-crashing rites of one of the couple.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were further conducted to complement and explore the recurring trends from the field research. A non-random sample was used, and two types of sampling strategies were adopted: snowball sampling and purposive sampling. My sample selection was purposeful, and biased towards persons whose attributes I focussed on in my research, that is Chinese people who are married. Hence, my sample consisted of people I contacted through my personal networks, associates of my support network, as well as individuals unfamiliar to me. In total, fifty interviews were conducted; thirty-eight interviews were carried out with

married individuals between 26 and 70 years old³, while interviews were also done with twelve wedding “specialists” – a wedding website author, a wedding planner, two bridal shops and three customary product retailers and five wedding photographers. In contrast to laypersons, these specialists were chosen because of the variety of perspectives they could offer given their specialist knowledge⁴.

In order to establish the probable changes and continuities in the Chinese wedding across time, my sample of laypersons included individuals married between six months to forty-two years. They were also selected on consideration that they come from different dialect groups and religions. I had originally planned to recruit an equivalent number of male and female informants. However, it quickly became clear to me that doing so might unnecessarily limit my study because the male informants I spoke to had little recollection of their weddings; they were often not active participants in their weddings (the insight that women did the majority of the wedding work is itself an important element of rituals that I will elaborate on later). Due to time and resource constraints, coupled with how existing literature suggests the import of the bride and how women are very much the targets of the wedding industry, I decided to focus predominantly on women. Such an emphasis allows us to reflect on gendered expectations and the associated standards for desirable behaviours. The profile of informants is shown in Appendix 1.1. Due to the sampling and qualitative approaches adopted, this study can only be applied to a particular

³ In total, seven older and thirty-one younger informants were interviewed. The older informants have been married between twenty and forty-two years, while the younger ones between six months and thirteen years respectively.

⁴ It was rather difficult to persuade wedding specialists to participate in my study, so I was therefore truly thankful to those who did participate. Unfortunately, perhaps due to their tight schedule, a few of these specialists did not respond to my follow-up emails seeking clarifications.

group of Chinese⁵. The emphasis is on understanding and highlighting the stories of these people rather than generalizing the findings.

I contacted potential subjects, and sought their informed consent either face-to-face or through email. After seeking their consent and understanding their preferred mode of interview, I proceeded to conduct the interviews either face-to-face, through MSN Web Messenger⁶, or email. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at the preferred venue of my informants as I wanted them to be at ease with their setting⁷. Interviews conducted via MSN Web Messenger were also conducted at my informants' conveniences. Each interview lasted from 20 minutes to 2 hours. While a few informants expressed themselves through Mandarin, English was the standard medium of communication with my informants. The ambiance during the interviews was informal. The semi-structured yet open-ended nature of these "conversations" allowed my informants the flexibility to articulate their sentiments freely and allowed me the chance to probe deeper into issues that required further clarifications. Due to the huge lapse in duration, a few of my older informants could not recall many details of their weddings. Several of my younger informants likewise had little recollection of their customary weddings despite being newly-married. That several of my younger informants had difficulties articulating about their customary weddings nevertheless provides some insights on the kinds of attitudes or how they make sense of this element of their wedding experience.

All my subjects were guaranteed complete anonymity and the confidentiality of the information collected. Informed consent for participation in the research was

⁵ The middle-income group and females are over-represented in my sample. Many Chinese wedding rituals e.g. wedding banquets and jewelry/ monetary gifts require quite a lot of economic capital; the occupations of my informants suggest that they ought to be medium-income earners who have the economic means to engage in such idealized norms.

⁶ MSN Web Messenger is a program which allows online and real-time conversation using a web-browser.

⁷ Besides food and beverage outlets, these sites include my informants' workplaces or homes.

obtained and my informants were notified of their rights to, at any stage, refuse data or to withdraw data they just supplied. In addition, all face-to-face interviews were recorded on audio tapes with permission unless my informants did not want the communication recorded. Each interview was later transcribed and translated where necessary. Ultimately, I managed the data by marking on the transcripts or conversation records what I felt were of interest and significance. Interviewing may be perceived as a “process that turns others into subjects so that their words can be appropriated for the benefit of the researcher” (Seidman 2006, p. 13). Complex issues about representation, voice and interpretive authority arise given that narrative researchers “develop their own voice(s) as they construct others’ voices and realities” (Chase 2005, p. 657). Interpreting interviews is tricky as the researcher has immense power over what part of the data and how it will be reported; making sense of qualitative data is never a systematic or straightforward activity. This is an ethical concern I have yet to fully resolve.

In addition to fieldwork and interviews, an analysis of public domain materials found in the “singaporebrides.com’ forum⁸ was also included. The platform offers a glimpse of the topics of discussion or issues that are of importance to prospective newly-weds, and what forms of advice or support are given. Four of the people I interviewed were participants of this forum. This thesis also tapped on secondary resources such as wedding blogs, related newspaper articles and bridal magazines. What was presented and the use of specific images and text in these mediums were examined. These secondary data helped to ascertain and cross-check my evidences.

⁸ The *Singapore Brides Forum* board is a platform where prospective newly-weds or married individuals can discuss anything about weddings.

Thesis Outline

In the next chapter, I will explore some of the theoretical ideas that have been useful for my analysis of marriage and ritual, as well as laying out my use of the concept of “archive”. I will look also at several theoretical issues that I feel are necessary to explore, such as gender, ethnicity and religion, in order to give a deeper analysis of marriage and wedding rituals in Singapore.

Chapter 3 starts off with a brief historical background to family, marriage and weddings in early Singapore Chinese society, as well as an illustration of wedding ceremonial celebration then. The notions of gender and class will be considered.

Chapter 4 explores the performance and significance of wedding rituals in post-colonial and contemporary Singapore. This section discusses contradictory rhetoric by the state, and its influence on family and marriage. A descriptive illustration of modern-day pre-wedding rituals and ceremonial celebration on the wedding day itself is provided. Rather than showing what a “typical” modern wedding looks like, the sketch demonstrates some of the ways in which key elements are dealt with today and how tradition is established and modified across time.

Chapter 5 addresses the notion of the archive and explores how it comes to be mediated in Chinese weddings in Singapore in light of increasing information technologies, and the consumption-oriented and media-saturated culture in contemporary society. It looks into how individuals grasp wedding ideals fashioned by way of the local wedding industry and global fashion. This is followed by a discussion on the documentation of weddings – through physical places such as wedding albums, and the move towards the electronic archive (the Internet).

Finally in my conclusion I revisit the question of what marriage means in modern Singapore, and how by looking at the tensions between negotiating tradition

and revolutionizing change in Chinese wedding rites over the past century, we can get insights into contemporary Singaporean struggles with their public and private selves.

CHAPTER 2

ANALYZING WEDDINGS

The Significance of Marriage

Much debate has occurred in the social sciences as to the meaning and function of marriage (Leach 1961, Riviere 1971, Needham 1971, Barnard and Good 1984), in an attempt to decide whether or not the institution could be said to be universal, or bear the same meaning cross-culturally. Edmund Leach, in his early ruminations about the usefulness of a universal definition of “marriage”, described the types of relationships found between men and women in cross-cultural comparison; he suggested that marriage was a “bundle of rights”, rights, not all of which were found universally, but could be found in varying combinations and permutations in different cultures of the world⁹. By recognizing these “bundles”, and the overlap of functions that these different rights and duties performed in different societies, one could get a better idea of cross-cultural variety, and not get caught up in insisting that “marriage” had one or more meanings and functions which had to be universal. To add to this emphasis on the varying purposes marriage is seen to have in different places and times, Peter Riviere (1971) insisted that marriage needed to be understood

⁹ These bundle of rights as enumerated by Leach (1961, p. 107-108) are:

- a) To establish the legal father of a woman’s children.
- b) To establish the legal mother of a man’s children.
- c) To give the husband a monopoly in the wife’s sexuality.
- d) To give the wife a monopoly in the husband’s sexuality.
- e) To give the husband partial or monopolistic rights to the wife’s domestic and other labour services.
- f) To give the wife partial or monopolistic rights to the husband’s labour services.
- g) To give the husband partial or total rights over property belonging or potentially accruing to the wife.
- h) To give the wife partial or total rights over property belonging or potentially accruing to the husband.
- i) To establish a joint fund of property – a partnership – for the benefit of the children of the marriage.
- j) To establish a socially significant ‘relationship of affinity’ between the husband and his wife’s brothers.

as a symbolic institution, that it was an expression of one of the possible relationships between women and men; what was associated with this particular union, might be symbolized in particular ways to contrast it with other types of relationships.

What can be clearly taken away from this debate is that with the changing social landscape of a particular group or community, marriage will come to play a different role. What I also want to argue here is that the symbolic significance of marriage as one possible relationship between gendered categories is also importantly encoded in the various different rites of marriage, and these rites may represent different aspects of this relationship. Different rites can come to symbolize the different “bundles of rights” of marriage Leach (1961) conceived to be conferred upon husbands and wives, and in doing so, underline one of the different aspects of relationships between gendered categories. As marriage is shaped by different social needs and expectations, the rites which symbolize its creation become negotiated to represent different ideas about marriage’s meaning and function.

Marriage and Ritual

My argument in this thesis is that people negotiate what marriage means to them through the rituals they choose to perform. At the same time, the rituals they perform have an effect on what they think of marriage. Individuals use marriage rituals in ways that are closely tied to their understanding of the meaning of marriage, which is not to be taken as strictly having one or more universal meanings and functions. Rather, marriage and the different rites of marriage need to be understood within the context of particular times and places. In this way, the ritual process becomes “potentially an active thing, not invariably as a restatement of a static or even cyclic state of affairs, but equally capable of making and marking a shift in a

situation” (Moore and Myerhoff 1977, p. 10). Many of the rituals that people perform for Chinese weddings in Singapore are seen as “traditional” and understood as rites that have been passed on through their grandparents from ancestors in an ancient time; but other rituals that have become important in the modern Singaporean Chinese wedding are clearly something new. In this context I want to not only explore what rituals are, and what they mean to people who do them, but how certain activities become “ritualized”, and how this “ritualization” process becomes a powerful means for creating new meanings in the contemporary wedding.

Rituals in this thesis will be defined as they have been by the anthropologist Robbie Davis-Floyd as “patterned, repetitive, and symbolic enactment of a cultural belief or value; the primary purpose of ritual is transformation” (1992, p. 8). Important characteristics of ritual that Davis-Floyd enumerates in his theoretical discussion (ibid.) include:

- a) The symbolic nature of ritual’s messages.
- b) Ritual’s emergence from a cognitive matrix (belief system).
- c) Rhythmic repetition and redundancy.
- d) The cognitive simplification that ritual works to engender in its participants.
- e) The cognitive stabilization that ritual can achieve for individuals under stress.
- f) The order, formality, and sense of inevitability established in ritual performances.
- g) The acting, stylization, and staging that often give ritual its elements of high drama.
- h) The intensification toward a climax that heightens ritual’s affective (emotional) impact.
- i) The cognitive transformation of its participants that is ritual’s primary purpose.
- j) Ritual’s importance in preserving the status quo in a given society.
- k) Ritual’s paradoxical effectiveness in achieving social change.

One of the basic purposes of rituals from a Durkheimian perspective is to maintain social solidarity within society. Ritual creates cohesion and binds us as members of a society. Building on Durkheim’s discourse, Dirks (1994, p. 484) contended that ritual embodies the essence of culture and is a site of cultural construction. But beyond the

“socializing” and “normalizing” functions of ritual, “Durkheim believed that through experiences of collective effervescence, not only was society reaffirmed, but new, sometimes radically new, social innovations were made possible” (Bellah 2005, p. 190). Thus, as Davis-Floyd (1992) also highlighted as above, ritual is not static, it can be an important factor in social change. As opposed to being a timeless consensus, ritual is subjected to changes, continuities and negotiation. But as Moore and Myerhoff (1997) argue, part of ritual’s message and meaning is its form; the form that ritual takes, as redundant and repetitive actions, helps it to become what they call a “traditionalizing instrument”; that is, even new ideas and objects can come to look traditional when shaped into a ritual.

Ritual serves as a reflection of wider public order and social norms. Davis-Floyd (1992, p. 9) suggested that ritual is a “powerful didactic and socializing tool” that works by sending messages to the involved performer[s] and receiver[s]. Presented symbolically, such messages may “regulate and affirm a coherent symmetrical relationship between individual subjectivity and the objective social order” (Munn 1973, p. 606). But we have to be careful to note that ritual acceptance is a public act not to be synonymous with belief; participation in a ritual constitutes acceptance of a particular public social order, regardless of the private state of belief (Rappaport 1979, p. 434). Individuals accept ritual, and in accepting, it does not matter whether they believe, since participation demonstrates to observers that going through the motions they do believe, regardless of their inner state. This is similar to Goffman’s contention in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, that actors present a certain “definition of the situation”, and continuing to perform according to this “definition”, actors may come to believe (1959, p. 6-7). Thus, while it is possible to establish a difference between the public and the private, the front stage and the back

stage, Rappaport contended that the private processes of individuals may be shaped by their ritual involvement to come into conformity with their public acts. In fact, “ritual is unique in at once establishing conventions, that is to say enunciating and accepting them, and in insulating them for usage. In both enunciating conventions and accepting them, it contains within itself not simply a symbolic representation of social contract, but a consumption of social contract,” (1979, p. 434). Hence, in her interpretation of Durkheimian discourse on ritual, Robert Bellah (2005, p. 193) advocated that “serious ritual performance has the capacity to transform not only the role but the personality of the participant”; rituals entail a commitment to future action, and in this way they differ from a strictly dramatic “performance” where the actor sheds the “role” at the end of it and the audience goes away knowing it was “only a play” (Rappaport 1979).

One type of ritual that plays an important role in transforming participants is the ritual form called rites of passage (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969). The term, coined by the French philosopher Arnold van Gennep, refers to a particular form that rituals take when they are done to celebrate and control transitions from one social state to another in a person’s life. Van Gennep conceptualized society as like a house (1960, p. 26), which people moved through across their lifetime; they had to cross “thresholds”, or *limen*, to move into different statuses, such as birth, marriage and death (1960). This movement into different stages, van Gennep suggested, was appeared to be structured into a similar form, consisting of three phases: pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal. The pre-liminal was symbolized by various rites that marked the separation of an individual from a preceding social state, such as cutting hair, nails, cloth, or changing clothes. The middle state of liminality was a period of transition in which the person going through rites of passage was in a kind of “no-

man's land", a status that was neither here nor there and symbolized by acts of washing and cleaning. The post-liminal period was a time of re-incorporation into society in a new social state, marked by all kinds of symbols of uniting and tying, often accompanied by feasting. As outlined by van Gennep, these three stages may be of varying degrees of importance depending on the situation.

Many theorists have elaborated on these ideas of rites of passages. Davis-Floyd suggested that rites of passage initiate transformations in both the society's understanding of the individual and individuals' understanding of themselves; these rites also "fence in" the dangers considered cross-culturally to be present in transitional periods (1992, p. 18). He suggested that one of the roles of rites of passage is to renew and revitalize the core values of society for those conducting the rites, as well as for those participating in or merely watching them. Examining wedding rituals as a rite of passage allows us to draw reference to how the initiates, the bride and groom, understand the meaning of marriage at particular times and places and explore how these rites are thus negotiated to reflect particular ideas about what marriage is in society. In early Chinese society the primary "function" of the different marriage rites of passage was establishing men as the legal fathers of their wives' children, as well as giving them the monopoly over their wives' sexuality, domestic and other labour services. For a woman the transition was twofold; she moved into both a new house and into adulthood. In her transition, then, great emphasis was placed on the ritual as an "incorporation". Marriage in early Chinese society very much negotiated, therefore, the transfer of a "bundle of socially safeguarded rights" (Ayling n.d., p. 6).

But as Leach (1961) argued, marriage and the different rites of marriage may have very different configurations in different societies. It may also change in any

given society across time. Modern marriage is increasingly perceived as a private matter involving the couple. This way, while a wedding still serves as a rite of passage, and still serves to transfer “bundles of rights” from one family to another, one can argue that as much as it is a moment of transition, it is very different from that envisioned by van Gennep (Mead 2007). I argue that present day weddings and the different rites that are done emphasize something different, namely that of a performance and display prepared and performed by and for the bride and groom. Instead of transition to adulthood or the start of an active sex life, these rites have come to be used as a means of individual expression and “a consumption-oriented” rite of passage”¹⁰. Ritual can be an important factor in social change; the different rites people choose to celebrate marriage across time can indicate the variations in how they think about marriage, and in relation to this, the role of the family and the different roles of men and women within it.

Consumerism, Individualism, Ritual Display and “Celebrification”

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has theorized a great deal about the changes that have taken place in contemporary society. He suggests that in the move from industrial society to post-industrial society, we have seen the transformation from being a society of producers to a society of consumers (Bauman 1998). This has consequently brought about a change in how people think of their lifestyles; while earlier generations were more likely to be guided by “ethics” and the responsibilities that their lives had towards others, young people today are increasingly “constructing” themselves as individuals through the things they consume and living “aesthetic” lives.

¹⁰ The expression “a consumption-oriented rite of passage” was used by Otnes and Lowrey (1993) to describe the American wedding; the rite is structured around different forms of consumption, and “sacred” or “profane” qualities are attributed to wedding artifacts (cited in Boden 2003, p. 50).

These “aesthetic” lives are very much influenced by the media. A number of scholars have paid particular interest to the relationship between ritual and media (Hughes-Freeland 1998; Couldry 2004). This association is paramount in examining ritual behavior today, especially in light of the increasing information technologies and the media-saturated culture in contemporary society. The media, through depicting and celebrating celebrity or idiosyncratic weddings, plays a key role in developing a popular wedding consumer culture. Additionally, the media anthropologist Nick Couldry (2004) has argued that the media is very influential in shaping our understanding of the social order, as well as actively creating that order through the construction of what he calls “ritual categories”. These ritual categories have to do with constructing our ideas about what is “live”, and “real”, as well as a contrast between “ordinary” people and “celebrities”. Couldry argues that there is a striking similarity between the socially oriented values that underlie Durkheim’s sociology of religion and the belief that media provides an access to social reality (Couldry 2004). The media, of course, also plays a role in developing and reinforcing beliefs about marriage, particularly those of a romanticized and idealized nature (Segrin and Nabi 2002). Often, the wedding consumer is encouraged to conceptualize his or her wedding to emulate such ideals of romanticism, fantasy and individualism. A central component of individualism is individual agency. As Brindley (2010) put forward in his discussion of individualism in early China, an agent can be seen as a subject that has the authority and power to act either from within the self or as a medium of a higher authority outside the individual. The individual is not an isolated part of a whole. Beyond being a subject that acts, the individual entails “a unique participant in a larger whole – both integral to the processes that define the whole as

well as to the change and transformation that stems from itself and its environment” (Brindley 2010, p. xxx).

Apart from particular ideals about marriage, weddings are also an opportunity for people to display and perform various kinds of roles. Singapore comprises a multi-cultural society riven along racial, language and religious lines. Everyone is assigned one out of the four “official” races (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others), when born. Berger suggests that even language, the “fundamental symbolic apparatus with which we grasp the world, order our experience and interpret our own existence”, is predefined and imposed upon individuals by society (1963, p. 117); this is clearly the case in the Singapore context¹¹. People are also assigned, and “do” gender by acting in gender-specific ways. Normative ideas of gender are reinforced. A lot of work goes into subscribing to roles and maintaining the impression that individuals are living up to the many standards by which they and their family are judged (Goffman 1959), and these “displays” are also reproduced in weddings. In particular, the Singapore Chinese wedding is a major event wherein the bride and groom ritualistically display gender, race and religiosity.

Archives and the Creation of Modern Rituals

The concept of the “archive” is central to this thesis. Derrida perceived the archive as being potentially infinite, and perpetually un-closed. According to Derrida (1996), the term “archive” derives from the term *arkhē*, which denotes both commencement and commandment. It brings together ideas about the past, about one’s origins or where things commence, but also a command to continue to do things in a particular way or order into the future. Derrida also suggested that an archive is

¹¹ In addition to English, Singapore’s bilingual education policy requires students in government schools to learn a second language – often assigned based on the ethnicity of the student’s father. This partly explains why Chan (2000) suggested that Singapore remains an overtly patriarchal state.

“at once institutive and conservative. Revolutionary and traditional” (1996, p. 7). It attempts to become a “law” by suggesting and putting forward something (revolutionary), but at the same time enforcing a particular idea (traditional). This idea encapsulates the paradox and tension of culture, being “fixed” and yet “changing”.

The ideas of “origins” and “roots” were implied in Derrida’s (1996) discussion of the function and nature of the archive in *Archive Fever*. Traditionally, the term “archives” have been understood as preserving memory and as holding onto the past. It is first and foremost a literal place in which a collection of documents are kept for commemoration. In her reading of Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, Zyl (2002)¹² outlined that Derrida actually saw the institution of the archive itself as existing in a suggestive relation to time. Through the power of the archive on the future-to-come, Derrida argued that the archive is about the future rather than the past. The influence of the archive in constructing the past and that of the past in setting rules for the future were implied. In his discussion of the archive in the modern state, Mike Featherstone (2006, p. 594) contended that the archive is a place that offers the “delights of discovering records and truths that have been hidden or lost, of resurrecting the past”. Everything becomes potentially significant and archivable in modern society (Featherstone 2006), especially in light of increasing information technologies and media-saturated culture in contemporary society. It is not necessary to see the archive as a physical place in order to appreciate and use this stance towards the past.

In her analysis of different types of archives, Harriet Bradley (1999, p. 118) suggested the content of the “archive” comes to be a “repository of meanings”.

Visual productions, underlined as one of the texts by Denzin (1992), are preserved by

¹² Susan van Zyl is one of the contributors to the book *Refiguring the Archive* (2002). The project recognizes that “the archive – all archive – is figured”, and seeks to engage the (re)figuring that is happening to the archive (Hamilton et al 2002, p. 7).

social actors in the attempt to create their own archives to preserve memory and hold onto the past. Photography is an intrinsic part of the wedding ritual today, with the taking and display of wedding photographs being increasingly “ritualized” behavior. We see the contemporary wedding rapidly becoming a technological feat underlining the archival display of the couple as a type of “celebrity”. Rebecca Mead (2007) suggests that the fundamental goal of wedding photography is precisely for the couple to be made to look as much like an image from a celebrity magazine as possible. Weddings thus can construct celebrities out of real ordinary people. This relates to Couldry’s reference to the “celebrification” and celebrity culture that underlie media rituals, which are defined by “formalized actions organized around key media-related categories and boundaries whose performances suggest a connection with wider media-related values” (2004, p. 1081). Drawing on Couldry (2004), the fact that individuals are exposing details of their private lives in the public may be attributed to the desire to display the self in the public eye. The boundaries of archives have widened alongside technological advancements, changing notions of marriage and the creation of modern wedding rituals – besides the physical archive (wedding albums), the electronic archive is fast becoming a documentation of the wedding. The notion of archive encapsulates some of the many tensions that are manoeuvred in the negotiation and meaning creation in Chinese weddings today.

Contemporary Weddings

Many scholars have made significant contributions to the growing body of wedding literature. Boden’s work examined the growing commercialization, consumerism and influence of romance on the wedding event in relation to broader societal changes in Britain. In scrutinizing the connection between wedding

consumption and the “romantic” experience, she underlined the import of the bride, popular media and wedding industry in perpetuating the wedding as “a fantasy-laden cultural event” (2003, p. 74). On a similar note, Chrys Ingraham (2008) examined the notion of the American white wedding and how popular media and the wedding industry use weddings to perpetuate heterosexuality. Cele Otnes and Elizabeth Pleck (2003) demonstrated the fantasy element of the wedding event, along with the role of marketing behind the production of the lavish white wedding tradition, whereas Mead (2007) underscored the power of the commercialization of the wedding culture and the tension between the yearning for both the new and the established in the wedding experience.

Mead (2007) also discussed the significance of the wedding album and its function in manufacturing “enhanced” memories of both the wedding performance and the couple’s self-transformation. In her study of the modern bridal industry in Taiwan, Bonnie Adrian (2003) likewise asserted that wedding photography – which includes wedding-day snapshots and pre-wedding bridal portraits, denotes more than mere consumption. The wedding photograph has the tendency to mediate and manipulate reality, and is infused with cultural meaning, emotional significance, as well as generation and gender-based influences. Boden (2003) highlighted that photographs and videos serve as tangible evidence of the couple’s existing romantic feelings. It is not surprising that a particular set of emotions, or feeling norms – as Janine Smith (1997) puts it, is associated with specially structured events such as weddings. In her qualitative exploratory study, Smith (1997) studied the emotions surrounding weddings – feeling norms, deviant emotions and how people manage their emotions.

In Singapore, getting married can be an elaborate ceremonial celebration or a simple civil proceeding. Some work has been conducted on the topic of Chinese weddings in Singapore in academia. Maurice Freedman's (1957) and Yeh's (1969) studies of the Chinese family and marriage provide windows to understanding the traditional Chinese wedding rituals expected in Singapore of the 1950s and 1960s respectively. As part of his research on the trends in traditional Chinese religion in Singapore, Tong (1989) identified the changing trends and performance of wedding rituals. Mainly, there was a movement towards retaining "core" marriage rituals and dispensing with those thought to be peripheral or superstitious. Lau's (1997) thesis looked at the meanings of Singaporean Chinese wedding, and focused on the shifting role of bridal specialists in managing wedding impressions. Considering the changing social landscape of Singapore society, she highlighted the increasing involvement of the couple in modern weddings. In contrast, Low (1996) examined the concept of "face" in weddings, while Hoon (1992) explored the issues brought about by the change in legislation with regards to marriage.

As much of the works on weddings specific to Singapore were done from the 1950s to the 1990s, more can be learnt of the modern-day Singapore Chinese wedding. Moreover, with the exception of Boden (2003), the majority of the works do not study weddings as negotiated performances or at least not within the framework of the ambivalence or tensions negotiated by the actors fronting the plethora of possibilities. None actually examine weddings in relation to contemporary Singaporeans' relationship with "the past" and "the future". Considering that early Chinese immigrants were likely shaped by the "particularly long and complex history of ceremonial practices" in China (Bell 2001, p. 372), this thesis is interested in tracing the meaning of marriage, the different rites of marriage and their symbolism

from colonial Chinese society up to contemporary times. By examining, as well, how actors negotiate collective wedding ceremony, and in doing so, establish and modify tradition, I attempt to go beyond what has already written about Chinese Singapore weddings, and analyze wedding consumption as a means of negotiating time and “archives”.

CHAPTER 3

THE CHANGING SIGNIFICANCE OF MARRIAGE

“There is no single definition of marriage; the functions of marriage, as marriage itself, are simply an expression, a consequence, of some deeper underlying structure” (Riviere 1971, p. 7).

Family and Marriage in Early Chinese Society in Singapore (1920s – 1950s)

It is crucial to understand how the family and marriage in Singapore Chinese culture was shaped by the conditions of early Singapore society, in order to get a better idea of what marriage meant at different historical periods, and how rituals have played different roles in highlighting different functions, rights and duties of the marriage bond¹³. In this section I contend that marriage was customarily a symbolic statement about one of the proper relationships between men and women (Riviere 1971) and an act between families. It was an expression of control over the sexual and reproductive capabilities of women. Therefore, customary wedding rituals underlined norms regarding women’s and men’s family roles, at the same time dramatizing the negotiation and passage of the woman into a bride and wife at both the individual and familial levels.

In the 19th century, numerous people from China were compelled to seek their livelihood elsewhere due to political upheaval, famines and wars in their regions of origin¹⁴. The majority of Chinese immigrants during the British colonial period in Singapore were men; it has been argued that this is because of the gender expectation associated with Chinese social structure and the social conditions of that era (Chin 1980, cited in Lai 1986). As the home was traditionally considered the rightful place

¹³ Insights for this section were mainly drawn from Freedman’s (1950 and 1957) works on the Chinese family and marriage in Singapore. Also pertinent were other contributions on gender, marriage and kinship relations in Singapore or the Chinese society at large (Lai 1986; Watson 1989; Hoon 1992; Lau 1997).

¹⁴ Majority of the early Chinese immigrants originated from southern China, predominantly the Guangdong, Fujian and Hainan province.

for women, they rarely ventured from home to seek a living. The major outflow of female immigrants only occurred in the late 1920s and the 1930s as a result of the impending war with Japan, economic depression and worsening conditions of famine (Lai 1986). There were primarily two categories of female immigrants – firstly, besides wives and relatives who came to join men, there were single women who came on a relatively voluntary basis without being in somebody's debt, and secondly, prostitutes and child domestic workers imported as part of the sale and transfer of women. In his study of Confucianism and the Chinese family in Singapore, Kuo (1987) suggested that early Chinese immigrants relied on the support from kinfolk in China for pooling of resources to make the trip; such financial support was expected given that members of the extended kinship system should, following Confucian ethics, assist each other in times of need. The large numbers of Chinese migrants to Singapore brought with them the ways of life, belief systems and social customs inherited from their homelands, but new conditions also called forth different meanings to kinship system and marriage among Chinese in Singapore.

Within what is often called the feudal-patriarchal society of ancient China, property, mostly in the form of land, was passed through the male line in the family. Males were therefore very imperative to ensure family descent, whereas females were subordinated to males in the different spheres of life¹⁵. The traditional system of Chinese marriage was purposeful. In the arrangement of a marriage, it was important that families were compatible in social and economic status and that it was brought

¹⁵ As Lai (1986) has highlighted, variations existed between classes, regions and dialect groups in China. For instance, women from economically poor class background, or whose husbands emigrated, had relatively more economic and social independence, as they had to work to maintain their families. Also, in the 19th and early 20th century, some Cantonese women of the Guangdong province formed an anti-marriage movement (Topley, cited in Lai 1986). To reject the subordinate position of women in marriage, these women organized themselves into sisterhoods and offered support for one another e.g. vowing to remain as spinsters and live together or coming together to stop their husbands from taking second wives.

about by the “command of the parents and the unctuous words of the go-betweenes” (Chiu 1968, p. 46). The authority of one’s parents in determining who one should marry was in effect institutionalized within the legal framework of ancient China (Chu 1961). Furthermore, marriages were largely contained within dialect groups and marriage between related persons of different surnames and not of the same generation were prohibited. Intra-surname marriages were considered mildly incestuous and prohibited by custom due to fears for the outcomes of mingling like blood. Patrilocal residence was also a strictly observed rule and a woman was required to leave the community she was brought up in and move to that of her husband. While physical detachment from her own lineage inevitably brought about social distance, marriage reinforced a relationship between two lineages. A reciprocal exchange of brides between two lineages continued as long as they were not in overt hostility (Freedman 1957).

In China, there was “an investment of interest in a particular union by whole groups” (Freedman 1957, p. 99), as marriage was by tradition an act between lineage groups. In their studies of Chinese kinship groups, Fried Morton (1970) and James Watson (1982) highlighted that the Chinese had never been consistent in their use of the English “clan” (*zu*) or “lineage” (*zong*); very often, the Chinese term *zu* was used for organizations that anthropologists would consider “clans” as well as “lineages”. Besides employing “clan” and “lineage” interchangeably, it is in effect debatable if the concept of “clan” is applicable in the immigrant society of Singapore. Watson (1982) emphasized that “clan” was loosely applied to Chinese kinship groups of every conceivable description. In the Chinese context, clans were composed of component lineages. They were “organized as corporations, with collectively-owned properties and joint activities” (Watson 1982, p. 610). Membership was not restricted solely to

relevant surname, and shareholders were lineages, not individuals. The notion of clans contrasted with groups that recruited members based on same surname. Comprising of individuals, these latter organizations operated as voluntary associations, and were called “common surname associations” in Taiwan and overseas Chinese settlements (Fried 1970, p. 23). With the huge flow of migrants from China to Singapore in the 19th century, the formation of surname associations in Singapore was more indicative of the organizations described by Fried (1970), than Chinese clans per se. In comparison to the home setting in China, rarely were there equivalent territorially close groupings of patrilineal kinsmen in early Singapore society. Agnatic kinship (that is kinship that is patrilineally traced) was reconstructed to encompass persons bearing the same surname. The emphasis of agnate and genuine lineage organizations had weakened with the structural change in overseas Chinese kinship grouping. Consequently, Freedman contended that the marriage of a son or a daughter in Singapore “is of major concern to parents and other members of the household but no larger clearly defined corporate group is so involved in the marriage” (1957, p. 99).

Confucianism¹⁶ is said to form the core of Chinese culture and has permeated Chinese societies for eras. The thinking and behavior of early Chinese immigrants to Singapore were deeply influenced by Confucian ethics, which can be understood to be based on the family institution (Kuo 1987). Marriage was by tradition an act performed between families, not individuals; it was to benefit the family institution (Hoon 1992). The Chinese wedding was therefore to a great extent a family event. With the importance of the family to the individual, parents wielded a lot of power in shaping whom one should marry and how respective ceremonies were conducted in early society. Writing about the Singapore Chinese family and marriage in early

¹⁶ Kuo (1987) identified a number of elements identified to be essential to Confucianism. They include filial piety, ancestral worship, family continuity (including son preference and patrilineal organization) and an extended kinship network.

society, Yeh (1969) thus contended that values emphasize the integrative aspect of members' roles in order to avoid the development of individual interests which might disrupt the solidarity of the family. Authority was conferred on the basis of age and sex, and while the oldest male had the most power in the family, the oldest female had the authority over all the other females, many of whom were in-marriage wives. Women were expected to marry early and large families were favored due to the deep-rooted desire for male heirs. Marriage was universal and, in relation to Leach's (1961) argument on "bundle of rights", it offered its participants "socially safeguarded rights" (Ayling n.d., p. 6) – husbands were established as the legal fathers of their wives' children, as well as given the monopoly over their wives' sexuality, domestic and other labour services.

Chinese Wedding Rites in Early Singapore

Freedman considered marriage to be the most important contractual relationship in Chinese society; to his mind marriage represented to the Chinese the "successful absorption of a 'foreign' woman into the family and the smooth regulation of ties created between two sets of kin" (1957, p. 11). This "absorption" took place in a rather protracted manner, with all kinds of rites surrounding the choosing of a bride, the negotiation of the transfer of control over her to her husband's family and other rites to ensure fertility and longevity. The types of rituals practiced by the immigrant Chinese in the early days were informed by marriage rituals commonly carried out in their homelands, suited to their situation in Singapore. The performance of such rituals dramatizes the negotiation and passage of the bride (firstly as an individual reaching adulthood and secondly passing her reproductive rights from one house to another).

The various rituals that a couple had to undergo prior to and on the wedding day can be seen to be transformative, with the ceremony affirming their transition into a new stage or phase of their lives (van Gennep 1960). Tying in with Leach's notion that marriage is a "bundle of rights", a set of rights is elaborated on in each ritual and conferred upon its adherents. Generally speaking, the first step involved the proposal of marriage (*ti qing*) or selection of spouses, which took place largely within each dialect-group and with consideration to parity in social status. The prospective couple had no rights to be involved in the decision as they were not yet considered adults. Such prior arrangements of the match were usually conducted with the use of a go-between. Magical tests of compatibility¹⁷ (*na ji*) might follow or precede approval by sight¹⁸. It was important to establish any discordance between the prospective couple prior to marriage, as well as the bride with her new home, to prevent the introduction of disharmony. Should there be no signs of a bad match, the engagement was fixed with the passing of gifts – betrothal (*guo da li*) and dowry, also known as a trousseau (*jia zhuang*).

Formal betrothal had three key features. These were, firstly the exchange of rings or other items of jewellery between the affianced couple. Secondly there was a giving of a number of slabs of peanut toffee (or possibly some other form of sweetmeat, such as large cakes) by the groom's side to the bride's side. These were intended to allow the bride's family to send out to their relatives an official announcement of the fact of the betrothal. Lastly there was the bride-price (*pin jing*), which consisted of an amount of cash, which was always offered in auspicious

¹⁷ According to Freedman (1957), there were two classes of magical tests of compatibility in Colonial Singapore. In the first class, inferences were drawn from ages of the proposed matches by laypersons. In the second class are the divine or professional examinations of horoscopic eight characters. Prior to such tests, the eight characters (year, month, day and hour of birth based on the lunar calendar) were exchanged (*Wen Ming*).

¹⁸ Traditionally, the Chinese bride and groom do not meet until their wedding day, but the bride is at least likely to have been inspected by her mother-in-law-to-be.

numbers. Although in ordinary day-to-day exchange Chinese tend to speak of this money as the “buying” of a bride (*mai xin niang*), bride-price customarily authenticates the passing of rights from the bride’s parents to those of the groom by securing “the right to keep the bride under one’s roof, to use her to bear children to one’s surname and to avail oneself of her domestic services” (Freedman 1957, p. 131). It gave the husband monopolistic rights to the wife’s sexuality and her labour services. Although bride-price was unreciprocated by any money from the bride’s family in early Singapore society, the bride was furnished with a trousseau or dowry to take with her to her new home (Freedman 1957). Red paper bearing the “double happiness” (*shuang xi*) character was pasted on surfaces as well as items pertaining to the wedding¹⁹.

Between the engagement and the nuptials, the date and time of rituals such as the setting up of the marriage bed (*an chuang*) and the actual wedding day, were fixed either by means of the traditional almanac (*thong su*), or by fortune-tellers and sometimes spirit-mediums. Such practices stem from the Chinese belief that the fate and life of humans are closely linked with that of gods and spiritual beings, and that there are auspicious and inauspicious days and timings to carry out ceremonies such as engagements and weddings. The supernatural are propitiated for specific functions; in this instance, they sought to foster a lasting and fruitful marriage union.

¹⁹ In addition to formal betrothal of adults, there were two other forms of traditional betrothal that took place at or before infancy. The affiancing of future offspring between prospective parents was “a living, if minor, institution in Singapore”, and usually derived from “the close association of two sets of parents who wish to reinforce their friendship with the tie of affinity” (Freedman 1957, p.133). Children were betrothed in infancy and the completion of marriage took place on maturity. The marriage was thus as an alliance between the two families, and no bride-price was paid at betrothal. In contrast, infant betrothal was the transferring of little girls by their parents to households in which they were intended to be brides; a diminished bride-price was passed between the two families (Freedman 1957). This system was said to save the girl’s parents the trouble of bringing her up, and provided her prospective parents-in-law with a source of domestic labour. Technically, she was to marry a particular son; but, in fact, it seemed that she could be married off in simplified ceremonial to any man her “parents-in-law” chose for her on maturity (Freedman 1957, p.104), which may or may not have been a son of the house. Hence, the parents transferred all rights in their daughter to the prospective parents-in-law; this type of “marriage” functioned almost like an adoption.

After selecting a propitious date for the wedding, the groom's family would seek the agreement of the bride's family. This rite was referred to as *qing qi*. While the twelfth lunar month tended to be a favored month, the seventh month was comparatively tabooed, as the Chinese believed that the hungry ghosts were let out of hell to roam the earth during this period (Freedman 1957). Early on the wedding day or the day before it, the bridal bed was set up by a "good fated" person (usually a woman with many children) at an auspicious time. A little boy might be made to roll upon it to augment its promise as the setting for a fertile union, thereby establishing the impending adulthood status of the couple and their generation of legitimate male offspring.

An important function of marriage in early Singapore Chinese society was the establishment of adulthood status for the couple. By acting as a traditional marker of adulthood and its associated duties and responsibilities, marriage came to be a confirmation of a change in a person's social status. This matches Leach's (1961) notion of marriage as a "bundle of rights". In traditional Chinese thinking, adulthood is formalized through the institution of marriage, and ritualized with a series of rites. A pair of candles were placed at the bedside and kept lit for three days and three nights after the wedding to symbolize the provision of light for a smooth transition to the next stage of the couple's life (Hoon 1992). On the other hand, at the house altar in the bride's and groom's separate houses, a pair of red candles bearing the image of the dragon and phoenix was lit respectively. Loh (2008) reported that this customarily denoted the "receiving of the groom and sending off of the bride"²⁰. The bride's trousseau, which usually included blankets – preferably red or pink, as this is the customary color symbol of joy – pillows, bolsters, bedroom door-curtains, a spittoon,

²⁰ Loh (2008) was citing Sean Liu, Principal consultant and owner of the *Fu Yuan The Wedding Shop*, who was interviewed on gift items exchanged in a traditional Chinese wedding (*Asiaone*, 17 September 2008).

a wash basin and various toilet articles, were fetched by the go-between a few days before the wedding and installed. During the night preceding the wedding ceremony, the bride and groom went through the rite of dressing the hair (*shang tou*) to mark their coming of age. In their respective homes, the duo was expected to don a new pair of special white cotton suits²¹ while their hair was being combed three times (Hoon 1992, p. 19; Freedman 1957, p. 134). Again, a person with a “good fate” was engaged to perform this ritual, and auspicious words were uttered, wishing the couple a harmonious marriage and that they would be blessed with many sons and grandsons. Ceremonial rituals celebrate the initiation of adulthood and lend authority to the legitimization of children – a pervasive intention for and defining feature of marriage in Chinese culture. To die without a descendant was considered a most unfilial act according to Confucian beliefs²²; here, ritual practices enhance cultural coherence by reinforcing the significance of sons and imploring for their birth.

Various customary wedding rituals dramatize the liminal state the bride is in, emphasizing her separation from her natal family (her being a “new person”), her inclusion into the man’s family (as a “foreign” woman) and the passing of rights between the two families. The entry of the bride to the groom’s family home provides one such example. On the wedding day, Cantonese custom required the groom and his attendants to fetch the bride and “bribe” their way through a resisting barrier of people, while the Hokkien groom kicked the door of the bridal car and, with a wicker tray held over the bride’s head, escorted her to the door of the house (Freedman 1957). One can speculate that this ceremonial procession serves to establish the conveying of the couple from one social state or status to another, transforming society’s perception

²¹ These white suits were to be kept till one’s death and worn by the deceased as burial clothes (Freedman 1957).

²² In ancient China, marriage was seen as a filial duty to be fulfilled because of the need to have male descendants in order to continue to veneration of the ancestors (Hoon 1992).

of them as being in a between status\ state of liminality to being soon married²³. After that, the bride would set off for the house of her father-in-law in her pink beribboned car²⁴. This ceremony was referred to as *ying qi*.

Individuals learn how to behave in a ritual such as this, which transpires to play up the “foreign” status of the bride and the cultural ideal of patrilineal kinship. The Chinese believe that a bride enters a phase of transition from the time she is veiled at her natal home and only emerges from it when she enters the bridal chamber (Freedman 1957). Separated from her natal family when she leaves her home and only officially recognized as part of the groom’s family after the acceptance of the cup of tea offered during the tea ceremony, the bride was in a “dangerous liminal stage” (Hoon 1992, p. 20). It is this liminal state of transition and the fact that the bride is considered a “foreign” woman to be embraced into the man’s family that her entry was a cause of anxiety (Hoon 1992). Apprehensive about a “clash” of horoscopes among those present at her entry to the groom’s family home, the family members avoided the bride by “hiding” in a room when she was ushered to the bridal room (Hoon 1992)²⁵. The bridal pair would pay their respect to the house deities, to Heaven and Earth and to the groom’s ancestors. Thereafter, they paid ceremonial respect to her parents-in-law and elders in her husband’s household with the ‘tea-serving’ ceremony (*jing cha*). In return, the elders gave the couple money filled red packets (*ang baos*). The bride was only officially recognized as part of the groom’s family after the acceptance of the cup of tea offered during the tea ceremony. This ritual

²³ In his account of early Chinese wedding in Singapore, Freedman (1957) noted the presence of onlookers and intruding observers surrounding the groom’s party when it arrived at the bridal home.

²⁴ Freedman (1957) cited a few traditional wedding versions. For instance, the bride could be escorted by a professional who “accompanies in marriage” and a couple of girl friends to the groom’s house. Then again, she could be ceremonially fetched by representatives from the groom’s side, or by a big procession including the groom himself.

²⁵ The family would only emerge from “hiding” during the tea ceremony. Apart from this ritual, someone would hold an umbrella over the bride whenever she stepped outside so as to “protect” her from malignant spirits. This also denoted her parents’ hope for her to live a well-protected life.

involved the incorporation of the bride into her husband's family to reproduce for the lineage. In contrast, already part of the lineage, the entry of the groom constitutes little ritualization in cultural terms; one could argue he does have liminality being in a between status, but certainly not as much as the bride. There was also little indication of an equivalent ritual during the groom's entry to the bride's family home. Therefore, rituals are transformative and mark the passage of the bride at the individual level (becoming a "new" member of a different descent group and reaching adulthood) and the familial level (passing of reproductive rights). Also, cultural forces were at work, establishing gendered expectations of the Chinese bride and groom entering marriage. While the groom gained exclusive sexual rights to his bride and the right to be the legitimate father of her children (Wolf and Huang 1980), the bride was supported by her husband's lineage in this life and the next – her tablet would be included in her husband's domestic altar. Marriage brought about status changes for Chinese men and women above and beyond adulthood.

As part of the wedding day ceremonial activities, the bridal couple would visit the bride's family home (*san zao hui men*). The bride would change out of her ready-made white Western bridal gown to a Shanghai gown²⁶ to symbolize the passing of three days²⁷. After being invited to the bride's father's house for a brief symbolic meal, they returned to the groom's house carrying a pair of sugarcane stalks, stuck with red patches of paper, and a cock and chicken. The former was an embodiment of sweetness and a promising future together; the cock and hen would guide the couple to a happy life together and represented the propagation of life. As part of ritual, they were put under the bed of the couple, and depending on whether the cock or hen came

²⁶ The elaborate wedding costumes much used in Malacca were not often seen in Singapore in the 1950s; instead, the standard was for men to wear a white sharkskin Western suit and for women to wear a pink or red Shanghai gown, or Western frock, or a white Western bridal gown (Freedman 1957).

²⁷ For the patrilocal traditional marriage in China, the bride's home visit took place on the third day of marriage; consummation should have taken place before this ceremonial visit.

out first, the sex of the couple's first child would be foretold. The concept of propagation is once again reinforced here; marriage as an institution legitimizes the bearing of children, especially for the husband's descent line – one of the “bundle of rights” identified by Leach (1961).

As part of the final series of rites and arguably the stage of “incorporation” of the rites of passage, two feasts were held in or near the groom's house for closely linked kinsmen in his own and his mother's lineages – one in mid-afternoon for women guests and another in the evening for the men (Freedman 1957; Yeh 1969). Such feasts help to incorporate the bride especially into her new status as being a daughter-in-law and wife to her husband and his family (van Gennep 1960, p. xiii). The couple re-entered society with their new status. Based on the situation Freedman (1957) observed in colonial Singapore, the evening feast largely comprised men of the groom's surname, clan association and fellow-villagers; it seemed that the new affines – the bride's family – were not invited²⁸. The lack of the bride's family at wedding feasts suggests that patriliney and patriarchy were very strong. One could perhaps also deduce that a reason for such an absence might lie in the purely practical realm of economic or space constraints, given such feasts were prepared by and held in or near the groom's house. Marriage brought together kinsmen of the groom's own and his mother's lineage (more to be discussed in the next section). It appeared widespread for guests to arrive late for the feasts²⁹. As part of the evening feast, the couple visited each of these round tables consecutively and invited their guests to drink with them.

As part of postliminal rites, the Cantonese presented a whole roast pig to the bride's family after the consummation of the marriage to signify that the bride was a

²⁸ Freedman (1957) suggested that no representatives of the bride's family were present during the feast in ancient China; it was acknowledged that there might have been local exceptions to this practice.

²⁹ In two of Freedman's (1957) accounts, the grand dinner feast slated for seven o'clock began only at a quarter-past eight and half-past eight respectively. Similarly, it was mentioned in one account that although timed for two o'clock, the women's feast took place at half-past three (Freedman 1957).

virgin. Retaining only the side meat, the remainder was returned to the groom's family as a reciprocal gesture. The virginity of the bride was, as Freedman (1957, p. 138) highlighted, "an implied condition of the contract of marriage". The bride's virginity was significant given that marriage was about establishing the husband's exclusive right over the wife's sexuality (Leach 1961); she did not have the same exclusive access to him, since second wives and concubines were common. Public demonstration of the bride's shortcoming might be made should she be proved to be deficient, with the pig's ear or tail cut off and paraded to the bride's family home (Freedman 1957). Hence, marriage was a "bundle of rights", and rites were used in an attempt to deal with societal expectations of the married couple; they characterized and shaped different ideas about marriage's meaning and function.

Marriage Rituals: Gender and Class

While subject to changes in the social and natural environment, marriage largely centres on the behavior, activities and relationships between men and women. Essentially, as stated earlier, marriage can be said to be "a symbolic statement about one of the proper relationships between adult members of the two sexes" (Riviere 1971, p. 65) and ceremonies of marriage celebrate the change in status of the couple as well as seek public acceptance and recognition. In view of that, the concepts of gender, but also class, have to be taken into consideration in the study of early Singapore Chinese society. Depending on the status of the wife, different rules governed the behavior and responsibilities of the participants in a marriage, as well as the ceremonial rites to be (or not to be) performed. Thus at the wider social level, marriage could also be a public declaration about one's social class.

In colonial Chinese society, it was not uncommon for women to be considered inferior to men, and for the relationship between husband and wife in marriages to be unequal. Traditionally, women are believed to belong to their natal families only temporarily, until they marry out and become part of their husband's families. As highlighted by Janice Stockard (2001, p. 49) in her examination of the meaning of marriage in different cultures, in traditional Chinese society, "conventional wisdom was that raising a daughter was like watering another man's garden". The primary roles of women are that of wife and mother. Consequently, the complete preparation of a daughter by her family is intended at raising her to be a daughter-in-law of another family. The duty of a daughter ends upon marriage given that "she no longer has any rights or obligations towards her own parents and family" (Tan 1976, p. 62) – she was sent to live with her husband's family, and although she could visit her own family from time to time, she was no longer expected to care for her parents and family, or perform ceremonial duties of ancestral worship to her own ancestors.

The financial responsibility of the patrilineal ceremonial celebration usually rested on the groom's family (Freedman 1957) perhaps because of societal expectations on the status of women and because the traditional wedding signified the passing of rights over the bride from her parents to those of the groom, and was very much prepared by and for the groom's family. Besides the feast, the costs of major items including the bride price, new clothes and furnishing, as well as payment of fees and red packets were amassed and put together by the groom's family (Freedman 1957). The groom's family therefore had much power in shaping and reproducing the traditional wedding in early Singapore. But in actual fact, it was the oldest female of his family – who shared common origins with the newcomer bride as "stranger" wives to the patrilocal residence (Stockard 2001) – who held supreme authority over

ceremonial performances such as weddings. She had control over the different rites surrounding other newer in-marrying females, thereby reinforcing the patriarchal system wherein everyone has his or her own position within a network of hierarchically organized interrelationships. Interestingly, relatives of the groom's mother attend the wedding feast – not the new wife's. This helps to underscore that a married woman's position was particularly marginal between marriage and motherhood. As Freedman (1957, p. 99) suggested, "motherhood progressively stabilizes the position of the married woman". With the power she gained in her husband's lineage after producing children, the groom's mother attained control over ritual and was able to include her own family in her children's rites of passage. Hence, not only does power lie in the hands of the groom's family (reinforcing the position of the husband over the wife), there are underlying power relations that exist between in-marrying wives across generations (the oldest female having authority over all the other females).

The Chinese settlement was a comparatively new establishment in which everyone started from scratch, and class differentiation was elementary. Differences in status and wealth were scarcely perceived by the Chinese in Singapore as differences in class. Instead, it was generally assumed that "individuals move freely up and down the scale and are not to be ascribed to relatively fixed segments of the society" (Freedman 1957, p. 109). Despite this fluidity, Freedman (1957) noted that the movement of women was restricted. Humble origins ultimately did not constrain a man. Based on his efforts, he could rise to the top, acquire a new position and seek a bride suitable to his status. However it was doubtful that a woman of servile status could overcome her station entirely by marriage – she might be married off to her master or his son as a secondary wife, or to an outsider of lowly standing as a primary

wife. Alternatively, a rich man's daughter rarely became anyone else's secondary wife. Secondary marriages³⁰ were not exceptional among the Straits Chinese males of Singapore. Typically, the families of Chinese male immigrants did not follow them, as migration by men was anticipated to be short-term. Indebtedness forced some men to retain and form families locally after entering primary marriages in China. Since the taking of new wife conferred a certain prestige, it was not uncommon for men to marry secondary wives or keep mistresses upon being rich. Cabaret girls and prostitutes, a fraction of who were Chinese women trafficked for the brothel market which began in the mid-19th century, furnished many of the marginal wives. However, while some widows might remarry, a woman could "be given and taken only once in primary marriage" (Freedman 1957, p. 100). Also, while ceremonial must be performed for the taking of a primary wife, such formality was not essential to the taking of secondary wives³¹.

Weddings of a New Orientation

While Chinese weddings in Singapore followed the common lines of the traditional system up to the early part of the twentieth century, new notions of nuptial rites had been "encroaching upon the territory of the traditional marriage" (Freedman 1957, p. 105) in the mid-twentieth century. Freedman suggested that "Evidence before the [Chinese Marriage] Committee showed clearly that two general types of marriage were current the Colony at the time. In the first place, there was marriage in the old style; in the second, a new form involving a public ceremony and a

³⁰ One man marries one woman as his first wife, and the marriage is preceded by the ceremonies of betrothal and the wedding. Freedman (1957) referred to this form of marriage as "primary" marriage. In addition to a "principal" wife, the Colonial law established that a man could have any number of secondary or "inferior" wives, or concubines (Freedman 1950).

³¹ In primary marriage, a woman must be a virgin. Freedman (1957, p. 102) however acknowledged that "non-virgins do sometimes go through forms of marriage proper to a primary wife; despite the fact that in general opinion such a wedding may be looked upon as a travesty of custom".

‘certificate’ of marriage” (1950, p. 104). There were no requisites defining weddings in the “old-style” that were common to all the Chinese, but some of its main features or sought after “essentials” included the prior arrangement of the match, the exchange of gifts, and the formal introduction of the bride to the groom’s house through the worship of household deities and the family’s ancestors, and the reverencing of the groom’s seniors via a tea ceremony³² (Freedman 1950). The formation of marriage rested on customary ceremonial celebrations which revolved in the vicinity of or within private homes. While wedding in the “old-style” declined in popularity, what was referred as the “new-style” wedding came to shape what a standard Chinese traditional marriage in Singapore was at that time (Freedman 1950).

Instead of being really a “new-style” wedding, this thesis argues that there had perhaps been a new orientation towards the idea of public display of the married couple – the marriage was performed in public and documented visually with the beginning of photography. A wedding became arguably more than just a family affair. Also, through the use of a standardized document or “certificate” of marriage, the government started to demand a certain control over marriage; it gave the union a sanction that could be legally upheld. Two instances of this new orientation of the wedding ceremony were featured in *Straits Times*,

“KOH Sok Hiong was a pre-university student at Nanyang Girls' School 57 years ago, and prided herself on her good memory. Then, her grandmother and family arranged for her to marry a distant relative, a 21-year-old reporter named Wee Kim Wee, the son of her mother's card-playing crony. The dutiful 19-year-old went through with the wedding at Pasir Panjang. Each table cost \$10, and there were 20 tables of guests. Her bridal make-up cost \$13 and a white gown, \$15.” – “I cried and cried when I had to stop schooling and get married”, 22 August 1993

³² Quoting the Chinese Marriage Committee (1926), Freedman (1950, p. 104) demonstrated that “there were no essentials for Chinese marriages in the old-style common to all the Districts of South China or to the locally-born descendants of emigrants from these Districts”, but there were considerable agreement on the mentioned main features which might be held to be the sought-after “essentials”.

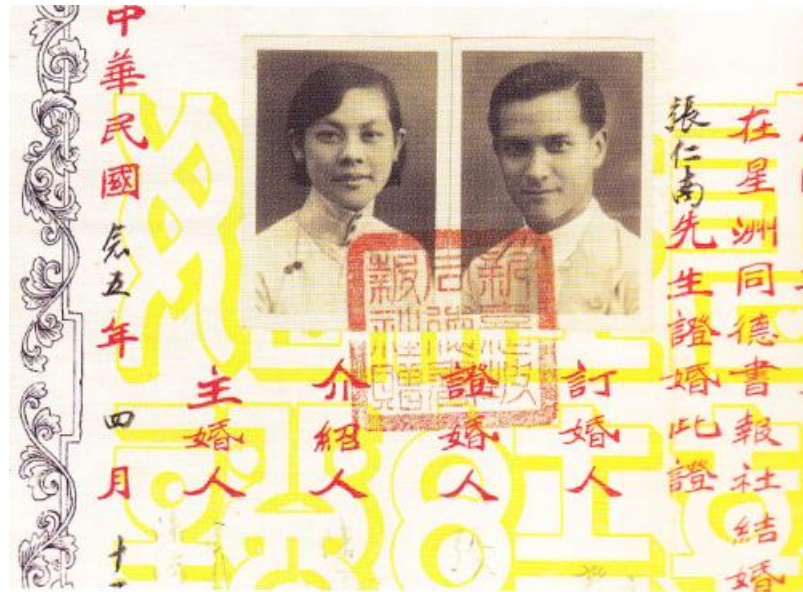
“MR YAP Tian Beng, 97, showed *The Straits Times* a red scroll with classical Chinese characters that he had kept for 71 years. It is his marriage certificate. The date: Oct 5, 1933. The place of wedding: Victoria Street. His youngest son, retired doctor Eric Yap, 63, had no clue that the marriage scrolls – one each for bride and groom – were in his father's possession... What he has seen is a black-and-white photograph of his father and mother, Madam Cheok Bong Neo, now 94, decked out in their Peranakan wedding finery. Dr Yap's daughter, Ms Joelle Yap, a polytechnic lecturer in her 30s, said: ‘I grew up looking at this photo of my grandparents hung proudly in our living room. We regard this as a family heirloom because such traditional wedding photos are very rare.’” – 7 June 2005

Both weddings cited above were held in public and entailed a “certificate” of marriage (see PLATE 1.1). The second wedding took place in the main hall of the United Chinese Library in Armenian Street in 1936 – then the headquarters of the Kuomintang in Singapore, in the presence of a solemniser (*Straits Times*, 7 April 1996). This was in line with Freedman’s (1950) observation that the new form of marriage was often performed in the club hall of territorial or clan associations, the local school, a hired public hall, or the Chinese Consulate-General³³. Traditional wedding photos were rare in early Singapore, but there were evidences of a handful of formal black and white studio shots taken then³⁴ (likely taken on the wedding day) (see PLATE 1.2). The majority of these photographs showed the bride and groom dressed in their Western bridal gown and suit – posing solemnly in what appeared to be photography studios – with wallpapers as backdrops; others were group shots comprising the couple, guests and family members present at the wedding. Besides being a keepsake of the union, photography as a ritual serves as proof of the couple’s marriage. They create an archive of the past, and can be handed down to from generation to generation as documentation of earlier weddings. Photographs were a manner of public display, both at that moment of time and for the future.

³³ Freedman (1950) highlighted that the element of publicity might be introduced even if the wedding took place in a private home.

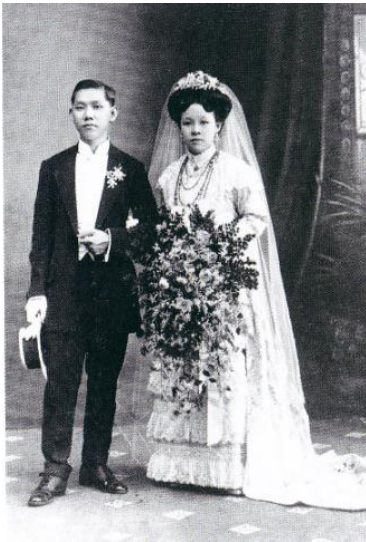
³⁴ Such evidences were found via the Picture Archives Singapore, which documents different aspects of Singapore’s history and society using pictorials.

PLATE 1.1 “Certificate” of marriage



Extract of Mr and Mrs Whee Kim Wee’s marriage certificate in 1936. This photograph is from *Cooking for the President: Reflections & Recipes of Mrs Whee Kim Wee*.

PLATE 1.2 Traditional weddings



Clockwise from top

A newly wed Chinese couple decked out in Western-style wedding costumes, presumably in the early 1910s. This photograph is from *Past Times: A Social History of Singapore*.

Many Chinese families held weddings at their clan associations. This portrait from the 1920s may include clan members, aside from the couple's immediate family. This photograph is from *Past Times: A Social History of Singapore*.

An October wedding of Mr and Mrs Goh Keng Swee. 1942. This photograph is from *Goh Keng Swee: A Portrait*.

Wedding photo of Mr and Mrs Whee Kim Wee taken on 12 April 1936. This photograph is from *Cooking for the President: Reflections & Recipes of Mrs Whee Kim Wee*.

Wedding of Wee Kim Tian and Teo Eng Kiat on 16 June 1936. This photograph is from *The History of Singapore: Lion City, Asian Tiger*.

Ceremonies of marriage in the new orientation do not exclude the likelihood of performing some of the older customary rituals. Also, the taking of new wives or concubinage – fundamentally considered a rooted Chinese institution within newer systems of family law during the colonial days, continued to be accepted as valid with the new orientation of the wedding ceremony until the initiation of the Civil Marriage Ordinance³⁵ in 1941 (Freedman 1950). Monogamy was sanctioned with this new introduction. There was a huge increase in civil marriages during the Japanese Occupation years, perhaps as a consequence of the “intense administrative control over the Chinese exercised by the Japanese” (Freedman 1957, p. 159). There continued to be a gradually increasing recourse to civil marriage during the post-war period. However, in no way did civil marriage replace the customary marriage; being registered by the government, it provided an additional legal layer to customary marriage, which remained as the only form of ceremony which received social recognition by the Chinese. Nonetheless, Freedman contended that the performance of the new wedding ceremony brought about a shift in the “the crucial point of marriage from prior negotiation and the passage of the bride, to the time when a man and a woman are publicly joined” (1950, p. 105). The significance of marriage began to shift; this new orientation of the wedding ceremony acted as a symbol of the government’s regulation and interference in the family. Beyond being just a family affair complete with customary ceremonial celebrations that symbolize a “bundle of rights” negotiated and conferred upon its adherents, the formation of marriage came to also rest upon ideas such as the public display of the married couple as well as the beginning of a relationship between two individuals.

³⁵ Freedman (1957) contended that, in many cases, the civil marriage was doubled by a more traditional ritual.

Marriage is shaped by different social needs and expectations. As part of the “modern” way of marriage, partner-finding was essentially a two-way compromise which involved younger people’s acceptance of proposed partners selected by parents or parents’ sanction of the matches initiated by their children. But, as Freedman (1957) stressed, the balance of modernist forces was often against parents. Living in a British colony brought Chinese in earlier Singapore into contact with essentially Western ideas of romantic love, courting and free choice in marriage. Ideals of romantic love, sexual equality and free choice, coupled with the unrestricted association of young people and greater exposure to modern education, the cinema and popular literature, increasingly impeded the marital objectives of parents. While parents were unlikely to select partners absolutely without reference to the wishes of the young people, they generally submitted if their child persevered in what they considered a disadvantageous match. Nonetheless, parents might retain some control over the younger generation’s choice of a spouse as there was “an explicit connexion made between the financial responsibility in marriage and the moral privilege of choice” (Freedman 1957, p. 157). A son who persisted in adhering to a self-determined marriage against the wishes of his family might well be expected to shoulder by himself more of the economic burden of the wedding ceremony. Although young people were gradually breaking away from traditional matchmaking and finding their own partners in marriage, surname exogamy continued to be extensively observed in the colonial Chinese society despite relaxations granted by newer systems of family law (Freedman 1950).

In summary, marriage can be understood as one possible relationship between gendered categories. Rituals are negotiated to represent different aspects of the relationship between the two genders; they symbolize different “bundles of rights”

(Leach 1961), and bolster institutional norms regarding women's and men's family roles and rights. Customary wedding rituals, in particular, sought to dramatize the negotiation and passage of the bride. The emphasis of agnatic and genuine lineage organizations had weakened in the overseas Chinese kinship grouping found in early Chinese society of Singapore, and as the acme of modernism, there was a gradual shift in the control over marriage from the family to the individual, and a move towards romantic ideas of love.

CHAPTER 4

CONTINUING (AND YET BREAKING) WITH TRADITIONS

“Sequences can be performed in ways that claim to reproduce time-honoured traditions or claim to revolutionize them. As a medium ritual tends to be conservative simply because it is always making use of an established physical vocabulary, but it still orchestrates fresh permutations in which tradition resonates within and legitimates new connections and meanings” (Bell 2001, p. 383)

The Performance and Significance of Ritual

Ritual, as argued in chapter 2, is a “traditionalizing instrument” that has “a link with the perpetual processes of the cosmos” (Moore and Myerhoff 1977, p. 4). The category of events customarily called collective ritual (or ceremony) carries a message about social\ cultural perpetuation, and has the capacity to express and impose social unity despite a range of imagery, symbols and styles (Freedman 1979; Watson 1985). With its tradition-celebrating role, ritual can traditionalize new materials as well as establish old traditions (Moore and Myerhoff 1997; Bell 2001). As opposed to being a timeless consensus, however, ritual is subjected to changes and continuities. It is negotiated to reflect the key cultural values, social needs as well as expectations of a particular social group at a given time. Marriage, I have been arguing, is one of the key points in the ceremonial life of an individual, and the rites which symbolize its creation become negotiated to represent different ideas about marriage’s meaning and function. As such, it becomes important to explore the tension implicit in how a particular group or community negotiates their relationship with the past as they go about engaging certain ideas of what traditional weddings were, and performing them in conjunction with options available at different times. What I want to demonstrate here is that, with collective ceremony entrenched in constant historical fluidity and dialectic tension (establishing and yet modifying

tradition), many tensions could be maneuvered and negotiated in the lives of individuals.

Contradictory Rhetoric in Post-Colonial Singapore

Various factors, policies and laws have affected Chinese marriage in post-colonial Singapore, and these elements are crucial in laying the background to understanding what marriage has become for the Chinese in Singapore in the 21st century. In this section, I contend that there is a contradiction between notions that Singaporeans hold on “conservative” Asian values, where family is important and filial piety is the guiding compass, versus the trend towards individualism³⁶. These two often conflicting value “systems” are supported by government policy in various ways – a lot has been done to break ties to larger social units of the family and “society”, whilst notions of filial piety and the family are reinforced in other ways. These contradictory policies and discourses cause individuals to be pulled in different ways, vis-à-vis the way they think about their weddings – as a family event, but at the same time as an individual display and spectacle.

The first two decades after the war in Singapore was marked by an extremely high fertility rate, with the average size of a family being very near seven children. Due to a fast growing population and post-war conditions, Singapore was plagued by acute housing shortages and related issues such as overcrowding and unhygienic living conditions in large communal squatter areas and shop houses. The extended family structure, which had three or four generations living under the same roof in squatter areas or shophouses, became the norm in the 1950s (Wong and Yeoh 2003;

³⁶ Insights for this section were mainly drawn from a range of works on Singapore, including Quah’s (1990) examination of the social significance of marriage and parenthood through respective government policies and social trends, and Chan’s (2000) study on the status of women in the patriarchal state.

Saw 2005). After the attainment of self-government, active family planning policies were hence implemented in the 1960s and 1970s to slow the trend of population expansion. In their discussion of fertility and family in Singapore, Wong and Yeoh (2003) asserted that campaigning posters, as well as practical incentives and disincentives targeted individuals' pragmatism and encouraged them to delay marriage and have only two children (irrespective of sex). As Kuo argues, the state had to "attack some traditional values not compatible with the value of the small family" (1987, p. 9). Instead of the traditional family-oriented perspective, marriage was introduced as a couple-oriented goal. According to Kuo, the extensive industrialization and economic development which took place in the post-independence days brought about the values of "individualism, utilitarianism and achievement orientation" (1987, p. 9), whilst family planning policies "debunked traditional values" (ibid.) essential to the Confucian family institution such as the preference for large families and for sons. Family planning policies thus quite successfully transmitted the idea that daughters are just as desirable (Kuo 1987), and the traditional son preference is no longer strongly adhered to (Koh 1995). Closely related to the changing status of the daughter was a simultaneous ascendance in the status of maternal relatives; there was "an explicit shift towards bilaterality, as far as kinship relations and exchanges are concerned" (Kuo 1987, p. 5). There was a shift in the role of the families involved in the Chinese wedding, from the groom's family holding absolute authority in the past, to the bride's and groom's families having increasingly comparable influence in post-colonial Singapore. Therefore, changing ideas about the concepts of family and kinship, as well as the purpose of marriage were introduced alongside family planning and population policies, and marriage was ever more implied as the beginning of a relationship between two individuals.

Besides industrialization and family planning policies, there was a mass rehousing campaign to public housing estates which took place in the 1950s to 1960s to solve urban housing shortage. This relocation of families from larger shared living arrangements to Housing and Development Board (HDB) public housing flats was cited by Wong and Yeoh (2003) as the reason behind the breakdown of the extended family arrangement. In fact, the move away from the extended family and towards the nuclear family might be a measured part of the overall development strategy of Singapore in the early post-war years. Besides being a 'natural' consequence of economic processes and industrialization, the small nuclear family was encouraged, with the belief that extended family relations were detrimental to diligence, innovation and economic progress (Kuo and Wong 1979; Hill and Lian 1995). It was widely believed that the extended Chinese family system posed a major impediment to economic development a few generations ago (Whyte 1996). It was with this frame of mind that Goh Keng Swee, one of Singapore's most important founding political figures, in his 1972 work on the economics of modernization, argued that the steady and continuous decline in age-specific fertility rates for all age groups in Singapore since 1957 meant that "it was possible to expand education expenditure without dreading that the inevitable outcome would be to flood the labour market with unemployable educated school-leavers" (quoted in Goh 1972, p. 151). Also, "it was possible to proceed with development planning with the hope that the resulting increment in GNP [Gross National Product] will not be eaten up by uncontrolled population increase" (ibid.). In following a pragmatic philosophy to governance, the state therefore took an active role in social planning and endorsing the nuclearization of Singapore families. Upgrading and housing policies left very few stable social units in place, nor did they encourage their formation. Such developments disturbed the

conventional power hierarchy and role relationships within the family; there was a move away from the Confucian extended family structure ideal. The meaning of marriage as an institution shifted away from being an act centred on reproducing for a lineage to a couple-oriented choice.

The status of women took a turn for the better in the late 1950s and early 1960s during the struggles over independence, in part due to the establishment of the Singapore Council of Women³⁷ and the passing of the Women's Charter³⁸ (Chan 2000). Amongst other stipulations, the Charter gave both husband and wife equal ownership rights to property and equal rights to divorce, and gave women the right to act in their own legal capacity. In particular, the statute outlawed polygamy and introduced a monogamous law for non-Muslim Singaporeans. In tracing the enactments of the Women's Charter, Leong (2008) contended that it played a significant role in Singapore's economic progress by legislating the equality of the wife with the husband and encouraging fuller economic participation by women. The immediate post-independence years and the 1970s were generally a period of rapid urbanization and sustainable economic growth in Singapore. In particular, women have gained tremendously in areas such as education and employment since the 1960s (Chan 2000). Literacy rates of women improved and female attendance in schools increased with the universal education policy (Chan 2000). A consequence of this was that more married women joined the labour force. Labour force statistics demonstrated that women were both entering the work force at a greater rate and staying longer in the work force (Quah 1993). This created an increasing number of

³⁷ Established in 1952, the Council supported the PAP in the 1959 election when the PAP pledged to form a society that would not exploit women (Chan 2000).

³⁸ The Women's Charter was passed on 24 May 1961, and is directed mainly at the non-Muslim population of Singapore. It is mostly concerned with women's roles, responsibilities, rights and duties in the family. Nonetheless, certain sections of the Charter are applicable to persons who married under Muslim law (Leong 1981, cited in Chan 2000).

wage earners in a family and contributed to rising prosperity. This resulted in growing affluence in the Singapore society.

Urbanization, the rise in female labour-force participation and education, as well as the series of social policies that were implemented, affected marriage in post-colonial Singapore in significant ways. Individuals or couples were starting to want to do things their own way. People were generally marrying at a later age. In particular, the proportions of single women over 30 has increased at all educational levels from 1970 to 1990, and the largest increase in the number of singles has been among the best-educated women (Quah 1990). Remaining single was associated with the maintenance of independence and greater freedom in making decisions affecting women's lives. Quah (1990) therefore asserted that, with "modernization", marriage was not a social or cultural or religious obligation, but a personal goal. The emphasis on individual choice and achievement prompted the rise of a much more pronounced orientation towards the individual and the relationship between the couple. Also, not only were marriages no longer contained within dialect groups, the Chinese were not necessarily marrying only Chinese. The decision to get married or remain single, and whom one married, became increasingly a private matter involving primarily the couple. With the curtailment of Confucian family values, the social relationships underpinning the marriage bond came to be more focused on the couple.

Furthermore, the move of women into the work force and increase in women receiving education augmented the unrestricted association between younger people. With the move towards romantic marriages, couples were given the chance to meet and be familiar with each other prior to the wedding day. According to Rindfuss and Morgan, who studied the revolution of marriage, sex and fertility in Asia, this "provides an opportunity for premarital sexual activity that did not exist earlier"

(1983, p. 270) with arranged marriages. A comparison between the mean age of first marriage at 26.9 years for Chinese Singapore resident ever-married females in the period 1991 – 2000 (Singapore Census of Population 2000), and the average age at which Singaporeans first had sex – 18.9 years (Global Sex Survey Report, quoted in Priya et al 2006), further suggests that sexual intercourse before the wedding day was probable. Within such a framework, the traditional concept wherein the virginity of the bride is “an implied condition of the marriage” (Freedman (1957, p. 138), had drastically diminished in significance. This was hardly surprising considering that the family no longer had absolute authority over wedding decisions. Considering the success of former anti-natalist policies and the changing role relationships within the family, the younger generation was drawn to think of their wedding as an individual spectacle. Also the introduction of the Internet to the general Singapore public in 1994 (Lee 2001) created new ways for people to communicate, gather and share information. The ways of meeting potential mates were also expanded with the development of new style “match-making” bodies. A lot had been done to break ties to larger social units of the family and “society”, and marriage came to be implied as the beginning of a relationship between two individuals.

With a declining birth rate and postponement of marriage in the 1980s – trends that resulted from highly successful government policies that sought to address problems which arose in the first post-war decade – the collectivity that had become interested in the marriage of young couples, at least as much as the family, was the Singapore state. The notion that the couple reproduces for a larger entity than just their own clan in some sense has gone hand in hand with the attenuation of family ties and the rise of the individual. As Geoffrey Benjamin (1988) posited in his discussion of the “unseen presence” of the nation-state, with the interference of the state in the

life of the individual, it is the individual as a unit, vis-à-vis the nation-state that becomes in some ways the most important tie in society. Marriage and procreation were linked to the sustainability of the Singapore economy and workforce in the long term. Hence, although very much a personal decision, the topic of marriage was often broached and discussed at national platforms. The political significance of marriage cannot be disregarded; just as much as the family, the government of Singapore had become particularly concerned about the marriage of the young.

Considering the low fertility and postponement of marriage in the 1980s, fears of labour shortage, quality workforce and a rapidly ageing population came to the fore. The government reversed its stance on family size and began to endorse pro-family and pro-marriage initiatives (Wong and Yeoh 2003). The importance of marriage and the family was reinforced through various policies, schemes and publicity campaigns, including the 1987 population policy in which the primary slogan was ‘Have Three Or More Children If You Can Afford It’, the 2001 Baby Bonus Scheme, as well as the subsequent ‘Romancing Singapore’ campaign in 2003. Similarly, the Singapore framework for elderly care was based on the cultural ideal of filial piety, which emphasizes the ideology of strong intergenerational ties and how the family ought to be the first line of support for the elderly. Recognizing that co-residence was not desired and wanting to promote “intimacy at a distance”³⁹, incentives were provided for families to live near one another – the housing grant quantum for young couples buying re-sale public housing flats was increased if the house was near to their parents (HDB Household Survey 2003, p. 12). The pro-

³⁹ The survey adopted the term “intimacy at a distance” from Silverstein and Bengston’s (1997) discussion of “intimate but distant” as one of the latent classes of intergenerational relations. The term was defined by “Adult children are engaged with their parents on emotional closeness and similarity of opinions but *not* based on geographic proximity, frequency of contact, providing assistance, and receiving assistance,” (p. 444).

family stance was also exemplified in the HDB 1995 policy of allowing first-time HDB flat buyers to rent flats as they waited for the completion of the building of their flats, such that younger couples were encouraged to start a family earlier (Kong and Chan 2000). Arguably, such strategies and policies were contextualized within the rhetoric of “communitarianism”, an ideology that is supposedly motivated by a Confucian ethic adopted by the government (Chua 1995), where the responsibility of the individual to the community and the significance of the family unit were emphasized.

As opposed to preceding policies which “encouraged” marriage and procreation as a couple-centric goal, the topics of marriage and procreation were often broached and discussed at national platforms concerning how citizens ought to do their part to ensure that Singaporeans form the bulk of the resident population by marrying and producing enough babies to replace themselves. Beyond the individual level, the wedding or the marriage per se was said to encompass responsibilities to larger social units. Private decisions on marriage and parenthood were articulated to have consequences for the nation. Responsibility to the family unit and filial piety to parents – elements inherent to the Confucian ethic – were espoused by the government in the attempt to turn population trends. Under the influence of such policy initiatives and state discourses, Singaporean Chinese were pulled to think about their wedding as a family event; a communitarian ethic was to have some bearing on the private sphere of marriage.

Hence, many tensions are being manoeuvred and negotiated in the lives of Singaporeans. Various factors, policies and laws had influenced Chinese marriage in post-colonial Singapore. This included the passing of the Women’s Charter and the outlawing of polygamy, the education of women and subsequent deployment of huge

numbers of women into the work force, the rise in orientation towards the individual and the relationship between the couple, as well as the rise of a consumer-oriented and technology-savvy society. Marriage has moved from being a family oriented to an individual and state oriented institution. Traditionally, the authority in deciding who one should marry resided in one's family. As a consequence of various factors, policies and laws, marriage has become ever more implied as the beginning of a relationship between two individuals today. Nonetheless, there were contradictions in the different policies and discourses affecting the family, Asian values, as well as individualism throughout Singapore's history.

Changes and Continuity in Ceremonial Celebration in Post-Colonial Singapore

Ritual can be taken as “an attempt to structure the way people think about social life” (Moore and Myerhoff 1977, p. 4) and a vehicle to reflect social relationships. I am arguing that individuals use marriage rituals in ways that are closely tied to their understanding of the meaning of marriage. The unique biographies, environments and the traditional values the Chinese were exposed to and socialized into accepting at any given point in time shapes the negotiation of ceremonial ritual. Contradictory government rhetoric and strategies regarding ideas of marriage and family in post-colonial Singapore brought about changes and continuities in the performance as well as the significance of Chinese rites of marriage. It is my contention that, while there is a break away from tradition, there is simultaneously a perpetuation of tradition. Ritual becomes a way to shape and perpetuate a new understanding of identity and tradition, but at the same time it becomes a way to embed and perpetuate certain traditional cultural values in ways that people may not be aware. I plan to show in the rest of this chapter how Chinese

marriage rituals in contemporary Singapore have come to be used as a way of creating and displaying a particular unique self for the couple in ways that are a radical break from the past. On the other hand, many of the traditional rituals, even in their negotiated new forms, perpetuate deeply embedded normative ideas about gender that, despite changes in the role of women in the family in present day Singapore, go unnoticed by actors. At the same time while the Chinese marriage rituals have become increasingly divorced from Chinese tradition, being reworked and negotiated to become something that suits each individual couple and their families, these rituals are increasingly becoming a mark of “Chineseness”, in a society which is highly self-conscious about cultural and “racial” identity. It is these paradoxes that will be dealt with in the rest of this chapter.

The Role of Customary Rites

Customary marriage was no longer recognized to be legally binding when the registration of marriage was made compulsory in 1961. Nonetheless, for the majority of the Chinese, the marriage process has continued to be not quite complete without customary rites. Evidence of the relative importance of customary celebration when compared to civil ceremony could be gleaned from the contrast in meanings attached to both ceremonies by law and actual processes of getting married in Singapore. At the outset, the law considered solemnization to be a public ceremony which accords legal significance and effects a change in status for the two parties (Tan 1999). This status change became for many very significant when people began to be resettled into HDB flats in the 1960s and with the mandatory requirement that flats be only

occupied by legally constituted families⁴⁰. In other words, a legal marriage was by and large the precondition for flat ownership⁴¹. But in actual fact, the visit to the Registration of Marriage (ROM) for the solemnization tended to be deemed as a private event, preliminary to getting married and attended by only immediate family members and close friends, while the customary marriage – which usually ended off with a wedding banquet, involved as many guests as could be afforded, and was communal, ceremonious and enthusiastic. ROM and HDB polices are central to contemporary decisions about marriage and timings of ceremonial weddings. Rising property prices, coupled with the long waiting time and the HDB ownership criterion that requires proof of marriage might have motivated couples to rush to register their marriage. As Tan pointed out, “registration precedes any real transformation in social status for most couples” (1999, p. 19); despite being officially married and entitled to live together, a couple rarely lived together until they had gone through the customary ceremony, which marks the completion of the marriage processes.

Despite legislative changes, the performance of various customary rites remains important to Singaporean Chinese. In the 1988 survey commissioned by Singapore Federation of Clan Associations on the festivals and customs practiced by Chinese, it was found that many (88%) continued to perform the *guo da li* (betrothal) ritual; of equivalent importance were the tea ceremony (92.2%) and the wedding dinner (87.1%) (Tong 1989, p. 24). While traditional rites of marriage remained important to the Singaporean Chinese, Hoon (1992) noted that there was a

⁴⁰ The Singles Citizen Scheme, wherein single persons who are at least 35 years old are permitted to purchase a 3-room flat, is an exception to this.

⁴¹ Under the HDB Fiancé\Fiancée Scheme, Singaporeans must show their marriage certificate within three months of taking ownership of their flat. In his examination of the gap and interaction between the law of marriage and the social reality of getting married in Singapore, Tan (1999, p. 19) pointed out that there was considerable misunderstandings of the HDB requirement during the 1980s, and many Singaporeans thought that they had to be married in order to apply for a HDB flat.

modification and simplification of complicated rituals over the years⁴². This selective retention of ritual practices must be considered against changes in the economic, religious and institutional systems in Singapore. Christianity flourished in post-colonial Singapore, attracting conversions from among young and educated Chinese (Goh 2010)⁴³. For these Chinese, there was “a movement away from traditional Chinese ritual practices that they consider to be ‘illogical’ and ‘irrational’ to a belief system which they perceive to be more ‘rational’” (Goh 2010, p. 4). The development of an open capitalist economy and dominance of the English language in society brought about greater privatization of ritual practices and the selective retention of rituals directed at the individual rather than the group (Tham 1985).

Collective ceremony began to establish new marriage traditions. Of increasing importance was the “meaning” behind respective ceremonial symbols and actions to the couple. For instance, the first couple to wed in a Community Club did so in 1991 because they had “a special affinity to it” (*Straits Times*, 9 May 1991). This contrasts with Lau’s (1997, p. 48) observation that “wedding dinners were simple affairs held on the void deck of one’s flat” in the 1960s (*Zao Bao Zhou Kan*, 17 November 1996). As opposed to dramatizing the negotiation and passage of the bride, collective rites of marriage were intended to display and create the unique self. Similarly, the excerpt below demonstrates that wedding photography had evolved and been manipulated to become more meaning-oriented,

“Fake backdrops and stiff, contrived poses have no place in modern wedding photographs, says Sumathi Vaidyanathan. Wedding photographs are now simple, elegant, expressive. Studio props like fireplaces and Grecian pillars are out, as are orchestrated poses. Says

⁴² Hoon (1992, p.4) stated, “It is common knowledge that in Singapore, many Chinese carry out the customary marriage rituals some time after the registry wedding. For some, the time lag may even reach up to a few years.”

⁴³ According to Tong (2007, p.2), there had been a growing number of converts to Christianity especially among the Chinese population – while only 2% of the Chinese identified themselves as Christians in 1920, the figures rose to 10.9% and 16.5% in 1980 and 2000 respectively.

Mr James W Ho of Unigraphics, a studio on Bukit Timah Road that specialises in portraits: ‘Nine years ago, you had the bride sitting on the floor while the groom leaned over her. Now all that is gone. Poses are very natural, like those you find in the paintings of old masters. The idea is to catch the expression on the faces of the couple.’... But if studio shots are getting simpler, outdoor shots are getting more adventurous. Says Mr David Yeo, Kolins studio manager: ‘Now we have couples who want to go to Sentosa or Mount Faber, while the more outdoor types head for East Coast Park.’ Adds Mr Lee: ‘A few years ago, everybody headed for the Botanic Gardens. Now they want places that have some meaning for them. ‘Doctor couples want the faculty building of the Singapore General Hospital in the background because they met there, university graduates want to pose in the campus.’” – *Straits Times*, 12 April 1992

There was a change in the performance and significance of wedding photography. Wedding photography and videography were made easy with the advent of small and mobile consumer digital cameras in the mid-1990s. Through wedding photography – a formality that grew to be expected of the post-colonial Singaporean Chinese wedding, couples were able to inject and create a meaningful wedding experience. No longer were orchestrated poses or venues desired; photographs went beyond serving as proof of the couple’s marriage. Rather, wedding photography revolved around the couple and their story. This demonstrates Moore and Myerhoff’s point that “Ritual may do much more than mirror existing social arrangements and existing modes of thought. It can act to reorganize them or even help to create them.” (1977, p. 5). The desire to generate individuality and meaning in one’s wedding ceremony increases when the social relationships underpinning the marriage bond become more focused on the couple, and can be achieved through the manipulation of various actions or symbols in rituals.

Apart from individuality, increasing affluence and contact with Western ideas of the “white” wedding brought about new rites that later grew to be expected of the

Singaporean Chinese wedding – holding the banquet at a restaurant or hotel⁴⁴, champagne pouring, bridal cake cutting, signing of wedding guest books, giving of wedding favors, etc. Coupled with a proliferation of specialty shops catering to the demands of a European style wedding in Singapore during the 1960s and 1970s (Lau 1997), ceremonial actions and symbols were manipulated to facilitate the display of the couple. Arguably, more comfortable circumstances also brought about more elaborate betrothal items – besides bride-price and wedding cakes, it became pervasive for the groom’s parents to give the bride jewellery (the dragon and phoenix bangles for the Cantonese and the four items of gold for the Teochew), and for the groom to present items such as hard liquor, clothes and shoes, pork legs and wedding dinner tables⁴⁵ to the bride’s family. A Cantonese family was also given four types of “seafood” – mushrooms, cuttlefish, abalone and dried shrimp. While these items and rituals appear to be absent in Freedman’s (1957) discussion of the Chinese wedding in early society, they encapsulated what were seen as important aspects of the wedding ceremony in post-colonial Singapore (Hoon 1992; Lau 1997). The growing affluence of society, as well as the proliferation of specialty shops, encouraged the increasing emphasis on marriage as a consumption-oriented rite of passage. Purchases of goods and services accentuated the display of the bride and groom in Chinese weddings and were a means of exhibiting status through extravagance. Accordingly, it can be argued the presentational style and manipulation of symbols in Chinese wedding rituals parallels economic realities and technological advancements of society.

⁴⁴ Together with their choice of representatives (with the total number of people decided by the restaurant or hotel), the couple does “food tasting” prior to the wedding day to decide on the menu to be served.

⁴⁵ Hoon (1992) noted that young couples were expected to pay for the dinner expenses themselves.

Wedding Rituals and Gender

Following the success of former anti-natalist policies and changing role relationships within the family, ritual grew to traditionalize new material focusing on the couple. One probable consequence of the shift in emphasis from the extended and natal families, to the couple and their new family in post-colonial Singapore was the change in symbolic message embedded in the giving of the whole roast pig – traditionally a symbol of the bride’s purity (virginity). Available data suggested that the giving a roast pig was still practised by the Cantonese⁴⁶. The pig would be cut up and distributed to the bride’s relatives, whilst the head and tail were returned to the groom to signify “a good beginning and end” to the marriage, thus symbolically focusing on the relationship of the couple; reference to the bride’s purity appears to have become muted. Partially this may have been tied to changing ideas of gender, partially to changing emphasis on reproduction in marriage. Thus, ceremony and marriage are not isolable occurrences. As Riviere (1971) elucidated, marriage is an expression of social structure; there is interplay between changing attitudes of the sexes towards each other and the changing nature of the marriage relationship.

Considerable social change had taken place in Singapore, and more egalitarian gender attitudes and behaviors began to govern various aspects of life. On the whole, women began to enjoy growing economic independence, better educational opportunities and higher societal status. As such, it was expected that Singaporean Chinese might no longer think of bride-price as compensation to the bride’s family for the transference of her rights; indeed, my older informants (Married for 20 to 40 years) considered the money as a token of appreciation to thank the bride’s family for raising her. Nonetheless, it would be misleading to identify the bride-price to be

⁴⁶ Hoon (1992, p. 23) discussed how the ritual of giving a roast pig amongst the Cantonese paralleled the ritual in which married daughters were to present of a raw pig’s head and tail during the funerals of their parents to symbolize “good beginning and a good end”.

merely a token of appreciation. The bride-price is not simply a token; implied in its adherence are gendered and cultural meanings. Rituals, in the Chinese world view are necessary to “sooth out” the disruptions generated by binding a man and a woman into the institution of marriage and creating ties between two sets of kin (Lau 1997). As such, bride-price has the purpose of creating a harmonious social relationship between the two groups by compensating the loss of one “object” with another; embedded in this idea, I suggest, continues to be the notion of a woman as a kind of “object” of exchange. Individuals internalize their gender roles and expectations with regards to Chinese rituals; there are habitual assumptions in gender binaries, as well as corresponding gender expectations and rights. The bride-price continues to be perceived as a prerogative of the bride’s family among other things. Both families discuss the amount of bride-price demanded until an agreement is met⁴⁷. This sensitivity towards the giving of bride-price might apply to both the post-colonial days as well as the future,

“Of course you must give *ping li* to the bride’s side. It is a must, at least during my time. You have to show some appreciation of the bride’s family [for bringing her up].” – Robert, Cantonese Buddhist, Married for 30 years

“If you were to ask me, whether we give *ping li* (bride-price) in the future depends on my in-laws. Sometimes it is not up to you. We might be laid-back when it comes to customary practices, but *ping li* this kind of thing depends on the other side. Really, whatever they want, we would just go along.” – Ling, Teochew Christian, Married for 6 years

While the groom’s family does not exactly “buy” the bride, the ritual of bride-price continues to be rooted in patrilineal notions. This also explains why the bride usually sits with her new husband’s family at the typical round table set-up of ten persons during the traditional wedding banquet. With the bride’s and groom’s families having

⁴⁷ This “negotiation” was likely to take place face-to-face between the two families, for instance, during the food tasting for the wedding banquet.

increasingly comparable influence in the post-colonial wedding ceremony, representatives from both families attend the banquet. Nonetheless, the bride sits separately from her natal family.

Individuals were pulled in different ways, *vis-à-vis* wedding rituals – laden with normative ideas of gender in relation to the family, but at the same time endorsing individual display and spectacle. This is hardly surprising considering the contradictions in government policies towards women. The enactment of the Women’s Charter reinforced the shift in public values towards seeing women as equal contributors as men. Nonetheless, national discourse on family life is typically associated to the stability of “traditional” family structures and values, and this inevitably signifies the assertion of patriarchal ideals (AWARE 1996). Chan contended that Singapore remains an overtly patriarchal state in which “the government continually warns of social decline if the family unit with the man as head-of-household is not supported” (2000, p. 50). Rituals bolster power relations that serve interests of male dominance, thereby elevating patriarchy and patrilineality, as well as normative ideas of gender. Customary marriage rituals sought to reinforce the position of one spouse over the other – empowering the husband (already established in the family and descent) and isolating the wife (married as a newcomer into the family).

Scholars have observed that it may be difficult to change the division of labour in rituals such as weddings as they are grounded in ideological traditions (Oswald 2000; Oswald and Suter 2004; Perry-Jenkins 1994). As opposed to the family having immense control over marriage and the wedding ceremony in earlier times, there is a shift in orientation towards the individual and the relationship between the couple in contemporary society. In fact, this ceremonial life-event rests largely on a particular

individual – the female. The bride is widely constructed as the centre of attention of a wedding, and is very much the target of the wedding industry. As Junxiong (Hokkien Free-thinker, married for 6 months) suggested, “She [his wife] is the focus of the day. I am just the *lu ye* (embellishment).” Deeply entrenched in the minds of many individuals is a dichotomization of appropriate gender roles and behavior regarding weddings. Many may use the modern ideology of weddings being for women, rather than the couples, to rationalize women’s greater involvement in wedding planning. Because the wedding day is for women, there are higher expectations on how they manage and “do” gender to their audience. This may also create greater motivations for both the wedding industry and the bride herself (or the bride and other women) to perfect her wedding image, than that of the groom. Women are, therefore, so often the ones who are obsessed with the minor details of contemporary weddings. Females might be expected to be involved in doing all the work associated with a wedding while males veto decisions surrounding wedding plans or help out to a lesser extent. This insight resonates with the notion that women continue to bear primary responsibilities for most of the household tasks (Straughan 1997, Szinovacz 1987). Wedding work reflects the traditional division of labor for domestic relations. Wedding planning and even the actual wedding itself (un)intentionally advocates and safeguards that the gendered expectations of the bride and groom are met. The wedding thus becomes a key event wherein women and men are expected to officially and ritualistically “display” gender (Humble et al 2007).

As Moore and Myerhoff (1977, p. 4) put forward, “Ritual and ceremony are employed to structure and present particular interpretations of social reality in a way that endows them with legitimacy”. Rituals and their symbolic meanings are subjected to changes and continuities, and often serve as a reflection of society and

the meaning of marriage. Contradictory rhetoric causes individuals to be pulled in different ways, vis-à-vis the way they think about their marriage – as a family event, but at the same time as an individual display and spectacle. Accordingly, rituals bolster power relations that underlie normative ideas of gender in relation to the family, yet uphold the development of the individual self.

Pre-wedding and Wedding-day Rituals in Contemporary Society

This section provides a descriptive illustration of modern-day pre-wedding rituals and ceremonial celebration on the wedding day itself. Rather than showing what a “typical” modern wedding looks like, the sketch demonstrates some of the ways in which key elements are dealt with and negotiated by my younger informants today. It also discusses the significance and prevalence of different ceremonial celebrations.

Pre-wedding Rituals

1. Proposal (*ti qing*)

Instead of a professional go-between, the prospective groom speaks directly to his prospective parents-in-law for their daughter’s hand in marriage. Specifics such as quantity and variety of betrothal gifts, bride-price, and customary practices to be included in the wedding ceremony are either discussed then, or between the two families during the food tasting to be held for the wedding banquet or negotiated by way of the bridal couple. With the exception of Junxiong (Hokkien Free-thinker, married for 6 months), whose father visited his then prospective-bride-to-be’s parents at their natal home and officially asked for her hand in marriage, the wedding proposals of my younger informants appeared to be comparatively less formal – no

official proposals (no representative of the prospective groom's family were present) or magical tests of compatibility were cited.

2. Selection of a propitious date and time (*qing qi*)

Above and beyond fortune tellers or diviners, the couple themselves or their parents makes reference to the Chinese calendar or the traditional almanac, *thong-su*, in deciding a propitious date, and occasionally a time, for the customary marriage. These favourable dates are at times determined by means of the Internet, wherein good wedding dates are calculated based on the Chinese calendar. The degree of commitment to this ritual might depend on the religious orientation of the couple; availability and convenience were found to be more important considerations for my Christian informants when selecting appropriate dates and timings for wedding ceremonies, as opposed to having propitious dates. This is in line with Tong's (1989) argument that Christians and non-religionist were less likely to practice traditional customs and rites than Shenists⁴⁸ and Buddhists. But irrespective of whether they are Christians or Shenists, the degree of commitment to customary wedding practices was generally lower among my younger informants. For instance, while most of them performed rites such as the tea ceremony, giving of betrothal gifts and wedding dinner, they were less likely to go through the hair combing and bed installation ceremonies, or select a propitious date and time. As noted by Tong (1989, p. 27), there was an inclination towards retaining core rituals but simplification or rejection of rituals that are considered to be peripheral or superstitious.

⁴⁸ "Shenism" was expounded by Elliot (1955) to refer to traditional Chinese syncretic religion. Syncretism is one of the distinct characteristics of Chinese religion and "one religion adapts some religious elements from other religions" (Chiu 1984, p. 380). Shenism focuses largely on the worship of gods, ghosts, and ancestors and according to Kuah-Pearce (2003), this elaborate system of rites without a central theology or an organized priesthood was the religious system that was reproduced in colonial Singapore.

3. Exchange of Gifts - Betrothal (*guo da li*) and Dowry (*jia zhuang*)

Depending on the dialects and requirements of both families, betrothal items are escorted to the bride's house up to a month before the customary wedding. Certain betrothal items that are common for all dialect groups include bride-price, jewellery, western cakes or peanut candy, mandarin oranges, wine and wedding dinner tables. Items are given in even digits as even digits are linked with joyous events. Instead of keeping everything, the bride's family will return a portion of the betrothal gifts (return gifts)⁴⁹. Bride price was unreciprocated in early society, but some of it is being returned in modern society. The change in nature of this ritual might have to do with changes in the value\ status of women and meaning of marriage. The bride's parents may reimburse their daughter and son-in-law's wedding expenses by giving them the red packets collected for their allocated number of wedding dinner tables. The bridal trousseau or dowry e.g. new clothing, tea set, sewing kit, bedding, blankets, wash basin and jewellery, are either delivered together with the return gifts or a few days before the wedding. Depending on the couple's inclinations, the exchange of gifts can be performed in the above-mentioned elaborate fashion or in a simplified manner. The giving of betrothal gifts was deemed as one of the core rituals retained by the majority of my younger informants. This was suggested by Alex (Teochew Christian, married for two years), "My wife and I were not too particular about the traditional practices like combing hair, drinking sweet desserts, pasting double happiness designs etc. The only traditional practices we retained were the betrothal gifts and the tea ceremony... We followed through with these traditional practices so as to honour our grandparents and parents." Another informant Joseph (Teochew Buddhist, married for three years) stated, "Actually we didn't mind

⁴⁹ The bride's family will return a portion of the betrothal gifts to the groom's family to avoid giving the impression that they are "selling" their daughter.

following through *guo da li* [betrothal]. It was part of the wedding ceremony. The *pin li* [bride-price] was something my family gave to her family to thank them for bringing her up. It also shows our sincerity at having her as part of our family.” Betrothal could have remained significant to the younger generation because it typifies the sincerity towards the marriage between the ties of the two families. It was also symbolic of the couple’s gratitude towards the bride’s parents.

4. Bed Installation (*an chuang*)

A “good fate” person (usually a woman with many children) sets up the bridal bed at an auspicious time. Occasionally, a young boy is to roll upon the bed and a pair of bedside lamps is turned on, in the anticipation that the couple will be blessed with many children and that their first child will be a boy. Similar to a few younger informants, Lyn (Teochew, Christian, married for 6 months) carried out the bed installation ceremony to please her parents. This coincides with what a wedding specialist John said, “A lot of customary ceremony are still widely practiced by young people today, partially to ‘please’ their elders and seniors.” Nonetheless, a proportion of my younger informants did not adhere to this rite for different reasons. Felicia (Hokkien Christian, married for 6 months) and Huizhen (Hokkien Buddhist, married for two years) respectively elucidated, “We installed our bed ourselves. The relatives did say that they want to get the kids to come over to roll on the bed, but we didn’t want to. Don’t want to go through the hassle of cleaning up the bed after that,” and “We didn’t install the bridal bed because we were already staying together.” The significance of this ceremony could have diminished because the Chinese bride and groom no longer considered it as establishing the impending adulthood status of the couple and or for the generation of legitimate male offspring – “rights” typically

associated with marriage in early Singapore. Alternatively, the younger generation might not see the significance of setting up the bridal bed as it was probable that the cohabitation as husband and wife had already transpired after the registration of marriage, prior to customary celebrations (as compared to the past, wherein cohabitation usually would only take place after the completion of the Chinese marriage).

5. Hair Combing (*shang tou*)

Like the bed installation ceremony, only a small proportion of my younger informants carried out the hair combing ceremony. The rite of hair combing is usually conducted during the night preceding the wedding ceremony (traditionally to mark the coming of age of the couple). If both parents are alive, one of them will perform the rite. Otherwise, a person with “good fate” is engaged to do so. Auspicious words are uttered, wishing the couple a harmonized marriage and many descendants. Interestingly, my informant Jiaqian (Hokkien Buddhist, married for two-and-a-half years) went through an impromptu hair combing ceremony on her wedding-day at the initiation of her videographer; her mother performed the “rite” using a random comb. Rarely do my younger informants consider the hair combing ceremony as a marker of adulthood. Instead, it was a fun affair or an act carried out to please one’s elders. Alternatively, it provided the platform for one to demonstrate his or her ethnicity.

Wedding-day Rituals

1. Collection of the Bride (*ying qi*)

On the wedding day, the groom arrives at the bride’s house in a car with his entourage. He has to “collect” his bride by a specific time, possibly chosen based on

the almanac or by a fortune teller, and undergo some form of door blocking wedding games or “trials” premeditated by female friends or relatives of his prospective bride, the *jie meis* (“sisters”, or the bride’s entourage), prior to getting into the house. This ritual is commonly referred to as the “morning gate-crashing”. According to wedding specialist Jina, bargaining for a red packet is one of the most popular games – this might have been derived from the early Cantonese custom which required the groom and his attendants to “bribe” their way through a resisting barrier of people. Besides demonstrating an unwillingness of the bride’s entourage to marry off the bride, the tradition of blocking the door tests the groom’s sincerity and love for the bride today. This explains why Lyn (Teochew Christian, married for 6 months) found the morning gate-crashing to be one of the most significant parts of her wedding, “it was the only time he would do all sorts of stupid things and I felt very wanted”.

2. Return to the Groom’s Family Home

After “collecting” the bride, the couple and their entourage proceeds to the groom’s family home. Should there be a family altar and their religion permit, the bridal couple will pay their respect to the groom’s ancestors and serve tea to his parents and elders. Sweet glutinous rice balls, *tang yuan*, will be consumed to represent a perfect match and a happy life together. As emphasized by Ling (Teochew Christian, married for 6 years), tension might arise should there be a rift between the religious orientation of the older generations and that of their children, “The only thing we didn’t do was ancestor worship. We created quite a scene by quarrelling in front of relatives and everybody there. My in-laws tried to push their luck because we already told them beforehand that we won’t do it.” It was imperative to Christians that they do not perform the worship of ancestor ritual as they considered it a

violation of their faith. The worship of ancestors was the only customary practice that was rejected by all my Christian informants, regardless of dialects or parental requests.

Conversely, tea was traditionally a “time-honored symbol of marriage” as it was believed to be the symbol of purity, firmness, love and luck (Wang 2005, p. 120). The tea ceremony was thus generally considered the most significant and meaningful Chinese wedding ritual; it was observed by all of my informants with minimal reservations. In a society in which public display of affection is minimal, the tea ceremony provides children with a visible platform to show their gratitude to their parents and for parents to shower good wishes upon the couple in return, “Westerners are very open with their actions – they give hugs and they say it out when they love you. I think we Chinese are more conservative and reserved, so that [the tea ceremony] is one way of showing we want to give our blessing.” (Jenny, Hokkien Taoist, married for 12 years). For centuries, filial piety has served as a guiding principle in Chinese culture; it prescribes how children should behave towards their parents. The wedding serves as a means to show one’s respect for parents. Younger informants agreed that filial piety was a key underlying value behind their wedding, as they wanted very much for their parents to be proud of both them and themselves.

3. Bride’s Home Visit (*san zao hui men*)

The symbolic “third-day” visit to the bride’s home is carried out as part of modern-day wedding day activities. Unlike in early Chinese society, the bridal pair will pay their respect to her ancestors (should their religion permit) and serve tea to the bride’s seniors as part of the home visit. This might relate to changes in the value\ status of women (as well as their families), and meaning of marriage.

4. Wedding Banquet

In the evening, banquets typically consisting of nine to ten courses (see PLATE 1.3) are held at hotels or restaurants. Common dishes on the menu include roasted pig or chicken, a whole fish, and a sweet dessert. The traditional wedding dinner are at times substituted with lunch banquets or for the Christians, a buffet or high tea reception immediately after church weddings⁵⁰ or subsequent lunch celebrations. These meals are not necessarily exclusive of one another. Depending on the couple's inclinations, different clusters of guests – close kin (e.g. parents, siblings), extended kin (e.g. uncles and aunts), friends and acquaintances, are invited to the wedding celebration. Significantly, there is the inclusion of the bride's family in such wedding celebrations today – this contrast greatly from the past, wherein the bride's family were not invited. The presence of the bride's family at wedding feasts points towards the growing importance of the bride's family, and suggests that patriliney and patriarchy might not be as strong as before. The newlyweds may have a change of attire over the course of the celebration, and have a "programme" planned in the sequence of what is to take place. For one of my informants, May (Hokkien Buddhist, married for 6 months), this "programme" consisted of things such as: 1) showing a video of the morning gate-crashing, 2) the bride's and groom's first entrance into the banquet hall in their wedding attire, 3) a change of clothes, 4) a second entrance, 5) champagne pouring on stage and 6) visits to all the tables (See Appendixes 1.2 and 1.3 for wedding-day programmes).

Within the worldview of my younger informants, the wedding feast was likened to an obligatory formality every bridal couple has to undergo. "I think for

⁵⁰ Weddings take a new significance with the addition of the church ceremony into the wedding itself for Christians. While the customary marriage traditionally served as the only form of ceremony which receives social recognition, for Christians, it was the service that they underwent in church that legitimatizes their marriage.

PLATE 1.3 Wedding banquet menus

Menu of The Night

乳猪大拼盘
Suckling Pig Cold Dish

鲛肉鱼翅
Braised Shark's Fin Soup with Crab Meat

当归烧鸭
Herbal Roasted Duck

清蒸顺壳
Steamed Live Soon Hock

白灼活虾
Steamed Live Prawn

脆皮烧鸡
Roasted Crispy Chicken

带子西兰花
Fresh Scallop with Broccoli

荷叶饭
Fried Rice in Lotus Leaf

白果芋泥
Yam Paste with Gingko Nut

Menu

龙凤大喜拼盘
(沙律虾、海蜇、醉鸡、八爪鱼、金钱肉)
Phoenix Platter
Prawn Salad, Jelly Fish, Drunken Chicken, Min. Octopus, Gold Corn Meat

红烧竹笙金勾翅
Braised Premier Moon-Cut Shark's Fin
with crab meat and bamboo pith

风沙蒜香脆皮鸡
Roast Crispy Chicken
Braised with salt & pepper, topped with deep-fried garlic, shallots & fine-chopped chili

港式蒸笋壳
Steamed Soon Hock in "Hong Kong Style"

葡仔花雕蒸活虾
Poached Live Prawns
with Chinese wine, in bamboo basket with lotus leaf

佛钵飘香
Deep-Fried Crispy Yam Ring
with vegetable stuffing

金银荷叶饭
Steamed Fragrance Rice in Lotus Leaf

杨枝甘露
Cream of Mango Pomelo

NOVOTEL SINGAPORE CLARKE QUAY

Banquet Menu

蜜渍乳猪拼盘
Barbecued Suckling Pig Combination Platter

圣柱竹笙鱼翅
Shark's Fin with Dry Scallop & Bamboo Piths

清蒸海斑
Steamed Sea Garoupa

鸳鸯全虾
Crispy Golden-Silver Prawns

荷叶鸡
Chicken in Lotus Leaf

北京填鸭
Jade's Signature Peking Duck with Handmade Roll

北菇扣海参
Stewed Sea Cucumber with Mushroom

干烧伊面
Fried Ee-Fu Noodle

百年好合
Red Bean Cream with Lily Bulbs & Lotus Seed

鸿运乳猪大拼盘
Fortune BBQ Suckling Pig Gold-Dressed Garnish Dish

红烧干贝竹笙海皇生翅
Braised Shark's Fin with Conpoy, Bamboo Pith & Diced Seafood

喜灼杞子海生中虾
Steamed Live Prawns with Wolfberries

XO酱翡翠象拔蚌带子
Sautéed Fresh Scallops & Geo-Duck Clams in XO Sauce

清蒸游水海石斑
Steamed Live Garoupa with Soya Sauce

宫廷一品脆皮鸡
Roasted Crispy Chicken

花菇焗菲鲍片
Braised Sliced Abalone with Flower Mushrooms

鲜野菌炆伊府面
Braised Ee-Fu Noodles with Mushrooms

红莲炖雪蛤
Double-boiled Hasma with Red Dates & Lotus Seeds

Menu

同乐五福大拼盘
Arena Cold Cut Combination Platter

美味麦片虾
Fried Prawns with Crispy Oats

红烧海味翅
Braised Shark's Fin Broth With Dried Seafood

蚝皇北菇扒海参
Braised Sea Cucumber and Mushrooms with Oyster Sauce

潮式蒸海石斑
Steamed Garoupa in Teochew Style

南乳吊烧鸡
Cantonese Style Roast Crispy Chicken

鲜虾荷叶饭
Steamed Fragrant Rice with Shrimps

椰汁白果芋泥
Yam Paste with Gingko Nuts in Coconut Milk

Chinese, the wedding banquet is a must. We have never thought of not having one. Anyway, our parents won't let us do that too." (Carina, Cantonese Buddhist, married for three years). Food has a uniquely important place in the social scheme of things – it is “a marker of social status, ritual status, special occasions, and other social facts” (Anderson 1988, p. 201). Any occasion could be an opportunity for a feast, and food is a means of communication. Besides a traditional wedding banquet and buffet dinner after her church wedding (on separate days), Jane (Hokkien Christian, married for four years) held a “retro night” at an Italian restaurant for her husband and her close friends. Such cosy get-togethers are becoming a new form of wedding celebration for the younger generation today. While the food offered might differ from those found in traditional wedding feasts, their meaning remain arguably the same – they serve as a means of communication and celebration of the union. Hence, the involvement of food in a Chinese wedding – a significant rite of passage, continues to be almost obligatory for the couple.

The Wedding and Chinese Identity: Establishing Traditions across Time

Much complexity lays behind negotiations concerning the traditional wedding ceremony vis-à-vis the couple themselves and other actors. While “tradition” continues to play an important part in the wedding, the celebrations that are performed connect traditions with something that is totally the couple's own. The following channel of communication between three brides-to-be/ brides under the thread “Any Cantonese Bride to Advise on Bridal Customs?” of the *Singapore Brides Forum* offers a glimpse of some of the tensions manoeuvred,

Author	Message
penn (penn)	Posted on Sunday, July 01, 2007 - 9:34 pm Hi all, I would appreciate your advice if what my mum (a

Cantonese) had asked for from the groom's side, in terms of betrothal gifts, is reasonable:

- 10 banquets tables
- Dowry (amount to be equivalent to the red packets received from 2 banquet tables)
- 1 roast pig
- Dragon phoenix bangles
- Seafood (e.g. dried scallops, abalone, mushroom)
- 2 bottles of hard liquor
- Red packets for my brother (for him to buy pants and shoes)
- Cakes (the number of boxes has yet to be decided)

My parents would not be contributing to the wedding ceremony, and would instead keep the red packets from all 10 tables. According to my mum, what she had requested for was basic and she could have asked for more. I am at a loss as my husband's family isn't too happy with the requests and my mum would not budge at all. My husband-to-be is half Eurasian. Although his father is Chinese, they are very westernized and are unfamiliar with such customary marriage practices. My husband-to-be tried communicating with his parents, but they still considered the requests excessive. The information they received from their relatives reinforced their belief that what my mum had asked for is unwarranted.

I'm really lost, sad and stressed....

kaye_(kayemoss)

Posted on Monday, July 02, 2007 - 1:19 pm

Penn, don't be sad. Just communicate with your parents, hubby & parents-in-law. Have you asked your parents what they giving to your hubby in return? For my case, I think the amount would be scary in comparison to what your mum asked for:

- 10 tables
- Dowry of \$8,888
- Roast Pig
- Cakes
- 2 bottles of Hard liquor (my hubby got Cordon Bleu)
- Cakes & cakes vouchers
- Pants & shoes for my younger brother
- Other miscellaneous stuff.

penn (penn)

Posted on Monday, July 02, 2007 - 8:49 pm

Thanks for the reply, Kaye. My mum has not really told me what she is giving in return. She briefly mentioned about returning part of dowry, half of the seafood, and preparing a red packet for him. Your hubby's side didn't nit-pick at your parents' requests?

kaye_(kayemoss) Posted on Monday, July 02, 2007 - 11:49 pm

Penn, I don't know if his family nick-picked. I can't be bothered either... I'm fine as long as both sides of the parents are satisfied. In fact, my mum gave them red packets – for my mother-in-law to buy a skirt, my father-in-law to buy shoes, and my hubby to buy pants and belt etc. Besides those, my hubby received a gold ring and a watch from my parents. So basically, my hubby's side can't nick-pick.

But I was rather pissed off with the number of cakes my in-laws requested from my side!

Cynthia Tan (cotton_hill) Posted on Tuesday, July 03, 2007 - 8:10 am

Kaye, no offence – I am just curious why your in-laws requested for cakes from your side? I have never heard of the practice wherein the groom's side would request for cakes. I thought that the groom's side would present cakes to bride's side, and the latter would return some to them in kind only?

kaye_(kayemoss) Posted on Tuesday, July 03, 2007 - 12:06 pm

Cynthia, its ok... That's the reason I am so pissed off with my in-laws over the cakes! They insisted that 6 boxes of cakes must be returned and that some of them must be butter cakes. I believe they want to distribute them to their relatives for consumption, but it is a funny request... Cakes are usually only distributed to the bride side.

Cynthia Tan (cotton_hill) Posted on Tuesday, July 03, 2007 - 12:11 pm

Kaye, based on my understanding, the purpose of distributing cakes is to notify the bride's relatives that she is getting married. For the bride's side to return cakes to their in-laws is simply an act of politeness. But, since they requested, why don't you submit? Butter cakes from the cake shop *Bengawan Solo* only costs \$6.50 – just show them your generosity.

penn (penn) Posted on Tuesday, July 03, 2007 - 7:59 pm

Kaye, at least your husband didn't feedback to you even if his parents nick-picked. You are such a lucky girl. I also found the request for cakes by the groom's side a little strange. This is the first time I'm hearing it too.

In addition to counsel and comfort, the above dialogue comprised revelations concerning Penn, Kaye and Cynthia's sentiments with regards to their own or one

another's weddings, as well as their outlooks on their parents or parents-in-law. It suggests that a three-tier negotiation may well underlie customary marriage preparations. At the outset, the couple negotiates among themselves and other actors. As suggested by forum participant Kaye, it is especially significant for the marrying couple and their parents to somehow work out and compromise their expectations and differences. Secondly, the actors involved have to negotiate the nature and extent of Chinese wedding practices to be performed. There is a body of materials – an accumulation of a body of knowledge, memory and understanding on social and cultural practices surrounding traditional Chinese weddings – which people employ and choose from. The last form of negotiation encompasses time, wherein the actors involved draw on an “archive” of customary practices relating to the past in conjunction with what is available in the present. Actors bargain and compromise on the inclusion of traditional customs adhered to in the past and contemporary practices informed by technological developments, global fashion and tastes in the modern-day Chinese wedding. As this section shall illustrate, customary wedding rites underpin Chinese culture and link the past, the present and the future.

The past influences the rules that are set for the present and future, and the archive has the power on the future-to-come (Derrida 1996). This might be evident through the practice of cake giving in betrothal today. Customarily, the groom's family presented wedding cakes or other forms of sweetmeat (e.g. peanut toffee) as part of the betrothal gifts to the bride's parents and these were distributed to the bride's close relatives (as official announcement of the betrothal) together with an invitation for the wedding banquet. It was interesting to note that all three forum participants in the dialogue above commented that it was “funny” and “a little strange” for the groom's family to request for wedding cakes from the bride's family.

Mindfulness of how this rite was performed and what was meant symbolically by the tradition induces in these women a sense of uncertainty towards this unconventionally new request. Despite conceding to her in-law's uncommon request, the understanding that the giving of wedding cakes was not usually done that way created in Kaye a degree of hostility towards her in-laws. It appears that how things were done in the past fashions certain expectations in people's conduct in modern society. As Davis-Floyd (1992, p. 9) put forward, "ritual is a powerful didactic and socializing tool". It attempts to align the belief system of the individual with that of the larger society (which is laden with habitual assumptions in gender binaries, as well as corresponding gender expectations and rights). To many Chinese, betrothal gifts continue to be considered a prerogative of the bride's family. Ritual can pay homage to time by reinforcing old traditions of the past.

One way the Chinese bride and groom engage the schema of negotiation in relation to time has to do with the process of "historical identification" (Steedman 1998). Expanding on Derrida's (1995) ideas, Bradley (1999) used the concept of "the archive" to better understand the dialectic relationship between past and present, and highlighted that the archive encourages in its users a sense of belonging. Singapore comprises a multi-cultural society riven along racial, language and religious lines. Everyone is assigned one out of the four "official" races – Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others, and arguably, each community has their respective history, language, ideas and practices. This model creates in society a highly self-conscious idea about ethnicity and about demonstrating it "properly". Many of my younger informants alleged that the adherence to traditional wedding customs that were practiced in the past demonstrates their "Chinese-ness" in the present day. For instance, highly conscious of her ethnicity, Mabel (Shanghainese Buddhist, married

for 7 years) said, “I feel, as Chinese, we need to preserve what is unique to us... I am not a superstitious person, but we should do it if we can – its tradition and for parents' peace of mind.” Mabel observed a number of traditional Chinese marriage rituals, including selecting an auspicious customary wedding date, undertaking the rituals of betrothal, lighting the dragon and phoenix candles, placing a pair of lamps by the bedside, paying respect to elders via the tea ceremony, as well as bed setting. She found it vital to perform the abovementioned rituals because they are considered unique to the Chinese. This idea of “uniqueness” works to underpin our ideas of culture in the present day. Steedman emphasized that “in the project of finding an identity through the processes of historical identification, the past is searched for something... that confirms the searcher in his or her sense of self, confirms the searcher as he or she wants to be” (quoted in Bradley 1999, p. 110). Drawing on the archive of how weddings are done in the past validates a sense of ethnicity that the modern Chinese bride and groom seek to embody. For instance, a bride-to-be on the *Singapore Brides Forum* thread “Hainanese Brides, anyone???” remarked,

“I'm a Hainanese bride-to-be. Was wondering what are our forgotten customs? Can anyone advise what is supposed to be 'Uniquely Hainanese'?”

Many couples attempt to employ rites specific to their dialect groups to reinforce the distinctiveness of their vernacular traditions. Also, an *Asiaone* article “Retro Nuptials” on 29 July 2008 described that “getting hitched the retro way seems to be the rage among Chinese couples” (see Appendix 1.4). It was suggested that bridal couples performed traditional marriage rituals out of respect for their parents and to regain their Chinese heritage. The association between customs and being “Chinese” was also brought up by wedding specialist Jina, “Preserving Chinese traditions is important for creating a common identity for the Chinese. It makes us feel that we

have something in common, a sense of unity. Chinese wedding traditions, in particular, embody our common beliefs and desires for the newly wedded.” People thus negotiate with time and deliberately integrate what was done in the past in their contemporary weddings to induce and create a sense of “Chinese-ness”. To some extent, there has been an inclination to standardize what is done as Chinese ritual, do away with diversity, and create a uniform idea of what being “Chinese” is. Ceremonial rites possess an appeal towards the construction and reinforcement of the bride and groom’s ethnic identity. Drawing on traditional marriage rites as a cultural resource signals a symbolic move towards “being\ doing local”; it denotes group membership and becomes a representation of one’s culture and identity as a Chinese. They have the influence to make the past become the present, and to reinforce one’s relationship with the past.

But this is not to say that the “present” has become the “past”. The wedding of the present is not a replica of the wedding of the past. Modern couples negotiate their relationship with the past by drawing upon certain ideas of what traditional weddings were, but they do perform them in conjunction with options available in the present. In the process of doing so, they negotiate collective ritual. As Turner (1969) put forward, the ritual process is potentially active; a ceremonial form marks change as often as it celebrates continuities. This can be seen in how diamonds or other forms of jewellery are quickly replacing yellow gold as betrothal or dowry gifts,

“We [Jane and her mother-in-law] went to buy the jewellery together because she wanted to make sure I like them. They are diamonds, not gold actually. A pair of earrings, a bracelet and a necklace... Well, I don’t wear any gold jewellery... They are so old. I might wear them when I am much older, I guess.” – Jane, Hokkien Christian, Married for four years

It was common practice for betrothal jewellery to be presented by the groom’s parents to the bride, based on her dialect group – the dragon and phoenix bangles for the

Cantonese and the four items of gold for the Teochew⁵¹. As can be seen, the younger generation appeared to favour other forms of jewellery over yellow gold because the latter was generally regarded as “old-fashioned”. Besides looking within one’s culture, individuals do look outward at the world. Global fashion and taste present an array of modern possibilities available to the “archives” the Chinese bride and groom draw upon. Something different is constructed out of old cultural materials (Moore and Myerhoff 1977). Collective ceremony gives form to this change; ritual thereby implies greater ease and consideration of the bride’s and groom’s inclinations.

Technological changes in contemporary Singapore likewise stretch the options accessible to the marrying couple and transform how customary practices are performed. Beyond the type of jewellery, another modification might typify the giving of betrothal jewellery. Contrary to the typical practice wherein jewellery was presented to the bride’s family alongside other betrothal gifts, Felicia (Hokkien Christian, married for 6 months) elucidated, “According to tradition, the mother-in-law is supposed to go with you. But, in my case, my mother-in-law didn’t go with me. She transferred the money to us and we went ourselves, so it was all very hassle free.” Her mother also kept a portion of the bride-price given during the betrothal ceremony, and did an electronic bank transfer to return the balance to the groom. Here, the modern electronic mode was favored as the “mode of transaction” over the traditional face-to-face way of performance. On a similar note, contemporary Singaporeans are increasingly reconsidering how the traditional practice of selecting a propitious date and time for the customary wedding is carried out. The ambivalence or tensions negotiated by different actors in contemporary weddings is made more problematic today by the ready archive of social and cultural practices considered to

⁵¹ Betrothal jewellery was often considered the mother-in-law’s welcome gift to the bride. At times, some parents gave their daughters jewellery as part of their dowry.

be traditional, and the growth and development of modern institutions and alternatives. It can be seen that the modern Chinese bride and groom are making change by taking over responsibilities traditionally undertaken by their parents. Ritual is subjected to changes and continuities; ceremonial forms are ever more negotiated and modified to reflect the liberation of the marrying couple over their wedding process.

Individuals negotiate with time and tradition. Culture ties the past, the present and the future together. As John, a wedding specialist I interviewed, commented, “Customary practices are not only history and out-dated trends. On the contrary, they are a treasure trove of knowledge in which our forefathers left behind to guide us to achieve a better future.” Many traditional rituals are tied to cultural values that are significant to the Chinese (Tong 1989) and are passed from one generation to another. These rituals or values often act as cultural acmes in a Chinese wedding. For example, wedding celebrations bring groups of people together and in a way, reinforces the social values of group spirit and harmony (Yen 1988). The Chinese wedding emphasizes a communal role. In particular, June (Hainanese Free-thinker, married for 32 years) underlined that wedding banquets, like funerals, bring together kin relations, “It is probably a way to inform everybody and also a way to celebrate. Actually if you think about it, only the *hong bai xi si* [red and white affairs] is a way where the whole extended family comes together, where you have a renewal of ties or whatever.” While the nature and presentation of the celebration might differ with time, many of my younger informants acknowledged the communal role of Chinese weddings. In addition to being a celebration of the couple’s romance and the beginning of their marriage, the occasion continues to serve as a get-together for close relations today. The presence and participation of close relations constitute

an integral part of the wedding celebration in all the weddings I observed and as affirmed by my informants. Consistent with the past and the present, the emphasis behind the communal role of a Chinese wedding may very well withstand time and remain imperative in the future. In relation to this, there was recognition among the people I interviewed that a wedding is a happy affair. Conflicts were avoided whenever possible. The marrying couple and parents tend to work out and compromise their differences,

“I see no point in having a conflict, like *‘I don’t want to do this, I don’t want to do that’*, then the relationship may also be very bad. No doubt, sometimes, I will ask my mother-in-law *‘why so much?’*, but no point, right? You not happy, but never mind, in the end everybody is happy on that day. So, I am ok if they want to go through all these. I understand it is their custom.” – June, Hainanese Free-thinker, Married for 30 years

“I wanted to argue, but ok lar, we compromise some then they compromise some, so ok lor.” – Ling, Teochew Christian, Married for 6 years

“People usually focus more on getting the ‘tasks’ done rather than on making sure people are happy. They are probably unhappy inside but don’t want to make things ugly because it is supposed to be a happy occasion. So that’s for practical reasons. Already have so many things to plan for, don’t want to add on to the list of managing conflict or mediation.” – Lyn, Teochew Christian, Married for 6 months

The pursuit of harmony is considered to be a fundamental Chinese value. Tan asserted that “reason or moderation, which in Chinese means ‘moderate and harmonious’, is also highly prized, one of the cardinal Confucian virtues” (1986, p. 32). A couple often negotiate amongst themselves and other actors, and with the nature and extent of ceremonies to be performed. In order to uphold a harmonious relationship, my older informants were prepared to concede and not contend against observing traditions of any kind. In contrast, while the younger generation might voice their apprehension or question the importance of certain customary practices, if probable, they stay level-headed and perform customary practices to circumvent

conflicts and maintain harmony within the family. Arguably, the maintenance of harmony or happiness could be interpreted as an attempt to put on a front and maintaining good “face”. The term “face” as defined by Goffman can be seen to be the “positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (1967, p. 5). Once an individual imparts a positive self-image of himself or herself to others, they feel a need to match that established image. Chinese weddings are widely interpreted to be joyous affairs, and actors involved are concerned about maintaining the impression that they are living up to the standard of being happy or harmonious. A lot of work goes in to “keeping up appearances” at public events like weddings. Through the concept of “face”, it becomes possible to note how rituals are used in an attempt to deal with societal expectations of the wedding couple and how rituals should be performed. The cultural belief that the Chinese wedding is a happy affair has survived the past to be abided today, and is liable to remain prevalent in the future.

As suggested, paying homage to culture and traditions is one of the key concepts of Chinese weddings today, and doing so ties time together. Culture promotes the performance of various marriage rites or practices, and has the power to link the past, the present and the future as one. The use of specific colors in Chinese weddings demonstrates this point. Colors play a significant part of Chinese culture. Different colors are associated with different things in Chinese culture, and knowledge of this differentiation consciously motivates certain color choices couples make in relation to their weddings. The use of colors such as red, gold and white was common in the customary wedding ceremonies I observed e.g. the bride’s wedding outfit, banquet invites and venue embellishment. Red trays, baskets, plates and bed sheets were cited by my informants. In particular, Felicia (Hokkien Christian, married

for 6 months) vividly recalled just how “red” the gifts her parents-in-laws bought for her husband and her were,

“All the stuff bought by my parents-in-law were red. They bought us a set of red night wear. We put it on, and two of us were like, ‘*we are so not going to touch it*’. It is bright red, you know? We look like two red chilli paddy standing by the bed. Then we took a photo of ourselves as evidence to show my in-laws. We were like ‘*that’s it, we wore it once*’ and changed out. We have red undergarments too, but we just left them there intact. They also bought red cushions, which totally mismatched the black sofa we have.”

Although she was rather appalled by the red articles presented by her elders, Felicia was conscious of the significance of red in Chinese weddings, “If you talk about typical traditional Chinese weddings, red is the color because *xi shi* (celebrations) in Chinese are *hong shi* (red affairs). You can’t run away from it.” Ultimately, Felicia and her husband did put on the red garments out of respect for tradition and their parents. In his description of the traditional Chinese family system and its relations with society at large, Lang asserted that the name “Red Affair” was traditionally given to a Chinese wedding because red was used in decorations and it symbolises happiness and joy (1946, p 36). Red is widely accepted as a symbolic color of happiness both in the past as well as in the present. Drawing on this cultural tenet, there was a general consensus among my older and younger informants that red and bright cheery colors were emblematic colors used in Chinese weddings. Colors such as gold and pink were incorporated into my younger informant Lilian’s customary marriage, “I didn’t use red because I didn’t like it. I used pink for my tea set. We agreed to using colors like pink, gold, which are like more Chinese things.” (Hainanese Free-thinker, married for two-and-a-half years). Evident in Lilian’s comment, the decision to use pink and gold in her wedding had to do with them being associated with being “Chinese”. Nonetheless, should the modern bride be dressed in a customary red cheongsam whilst serving tea to her seniors or late in her wedding

banquet, she might well be clad in the white wedding gown at other parts of the wedding. Modern colors of bliss are being conjured considering the Western idea of a “white wedding”, notions of romance and traditionally favored colors in Chinese weddings.

Hence, when preparing for their modern-day customary marriage celebration, couples often engage in a three-tier negotiation involving themselves and other actors, with social and cultural “archives”, and lastly, with time. There is a unique negotiation of cultural orientations. Modifications are made to ritual to traditionalize new material focusing on the couple. At the same time, one’s relationship with the past and the present is negotiated as he or she draws upon ideas of what traditional weddings were, and performs them alongside possibilities available in the present. In the process of doing so, the user’s relationship with the past is reinforced, and he or she is provided with a sense of “Chinese-ness”. Wedding ceremonies reinforce Chinese culture and links the past, the present and the future as one.

CHAPTER 5:
FROM PHOTOGRAPHS TO INTERNET:
CONSTRUCTING NEW ARCHIVES

“The archive is a place for dreams and revelation, a place of longing where the world can turn on the discovery of an insignificant fragment: a place for creating and re-working memory. This may not just be the activity of the solitary researcher wandering through the scholarly or official archives, but the activity of individuals in everyday life who seek to preserve documents, photographs, diaries and recordings to develop their own archives as memory devices.” (Featherstone 2006, p. 594).

The Archive as a “Place”

Traditionally, the term “archives” have been understood as preserving memory and as holding onto the past. The archive has a suggestive relation to time; it has the influence to construct the past and set rules for the future (Derrida 1996). To add to the emphasis of the archive being a reconstruction of the past, Bradley suggested that “the archive is the repository of memories: individual and collective, official and unofficial, licit and illicit, legitimating and subversive” (1999, p. 109). On the basis of such memories, individuals attempt to “reconstruct, restore, recover the past, to present and re-present stories of the past within our narratives” (ibid.). The archive can thus be seen an embodiment of traditions and a repository of cultural production which individuals draw upon in their everyday life. Although it is not necessary to see the archive as a physical place to appreciate and use this stance towards the past, it is noteworthy for this thesis to examine Derrida’s idea of the archive being a “place”. What is this place in regards to weddings, and how do individuals use it in the past and the present? Building on Derrida’s idea that the archive is first and foremost a literal place in which a collection of documents are kept for commemoration, amongst others, this thesis suggests that this place can take the form of physical places such as wedding albums.

Featherstone noted that “the will to archive is a powerful impulse in contemporary culture” (2000, p. 595). The notion of archive becomes of paramount importance to modern society considering the increasing desire to display the self and the technological developments which make it possible for people to become their own archivists. This chapter rethinks the notion of the archive and explores how it comes to be mediated in Chinese weddings in Singapore, especially in light of increasing information technologies, the consumption-oriented and media-saturated culture in contemporary society. It will be argued that the bridal couple seeks to showcase individuality and display themselves as a “celebrity”. Also, with regards to the documentation of weddings, there is a move from the physical photo album to the Internet. As in real life face-to-face interactions, the couple negotiates impressions by manipulating the portrayal of the wedding performance documented in the archive, just as Goffman suggests is done when someone directing a performance to a specific viewer (1959). In this way, the archive becomes, as Featherstone (2006, p. 594) puts it, “a place for creating and re-working memory” – it is where individuals negotiate the retention and display of selective “memories” of their carefully manipulated wedding performance.

Personalization and Display of the Unique Self

As mentioned earlier, Bauman (2004) suggests that life projects are fashioned around consumer choices in contemporary society. People think of themselves as living “aesthetic” lives – they must invest time, money and effort to transform their bodies to fit culturally-mediated idealized images. Building on Bauman’s ideas, this section explores how the modern wedding is fashioned to be a spectacle or display of self that showcases individuality. It is suggested that, in light of the promotion of

consumption in the media and by wedding industry, wedding consumers are encouraged to conceptualize their weddings to emulate the ideals of romanticism, fantasy and individualism. More and more Singaporean Chinese couples are constructing their own perfect wedding affairs. They draw from a repository of expected ceremonial events from the past and create something different vis-à-vis their contemporaries. In doing so, they make their mark on the future-to-come by constructing the practices that people in the future may draw upon for their impending weddings.

What marks a perfect wedding today differs from that in the past. With the emphasis on individual choice and achievement, as well as the growing affluence of Singapore society, what has become important to the couple is what they can achieve. It is not uncommon for special performances, such as singing by the bride or groom, to be incorporated into the ceremony. Increasingly, couples are also showcasing a video montage of their pre-wedding photo-shoot, morning gate-crashing and love story during their church ceremonies or banquets. Other popular practices involve the display of the pre-wedding photo album at one's wedding ceremony reception and for the wedding invitation to the church ceremony to bear the image of the wedding couple in their wedding attire⁵². Therefore, one can deduce that a prominent feature of the present-day wedding ceremony lies in the display of the couple. This concept contrasts with what my older informant June noted about past weddings,

“Now, the couple would go up the stage and thank their parents. They would also show their photos. Last time, people just come, happy, sit down, talk, eat then just *yum sheng* [toast], then go down the stage. There was no programme per se. Everybody simply talk around the table – very noisy. It is not that kind that the focus was on the bride and groom.” – Married for 32 years.

⁵² Out of the five church weddings I attended, three had illustrations of the marrying couple featured on the wedding invitation. For examples of such illustrations, see PLATE 1.4.

PLATE 1.4 Illustrations of the marrying couple featured on the wedding invitation⁵³



Anna
Yih Hwei

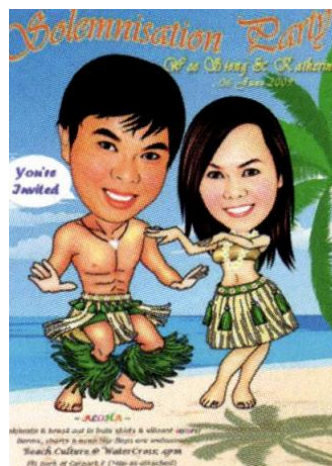
Warmly invite you to share
A celebration of God's love
The Holy Matrimony will be held

On Saturday, Fourth of July 2009
at 11.00am
-Please to be seated at 10.45am-

in the Church of St. Theresa
510 kampung Bahru Road
Singapore 099446

Lunch reception will follow the ceremony

This is the happiest day of our lives, please be punctual
RSVP - Yih Hwei - 90902500 - Anna - 98537137



⁵³ These photographs are obtained from <http://specialwedding09.wordpress.com/>, <http://www.singaporebrides.com/forumboard/messages/58/894933.html?1308979137> and Style: Weddings Issue 14 Sep 09 – Feb 10.

The wedding of the past was a festive affair that demonstrated the ideals of the groom's family and a ritual of transformation for the couple. Since marriage is now understood as a relationship between two individuals, the perfect wedding is seen as a celebration of their romance and the beginning of their marriage, and is constructed to be a unique, romantic and beautiful affair; the event itself and its visual documentation strives to embody a blissful fairy-tale story of the coming together of the couple. The entire wedding has shifted from being family-oriented to becoming a spectacle of the bridal couple. Thus, much effort is put in by the couple to tailor the wedding to their individual taste and to make it a couple-centric spectacle. It is intended and constructed to be a display of self. In his discussion of media rituals, Couldry contended that the media socializes individuals to seek the display of self in the public eye; this desire to be a public personality involves a "celebrification process", wherein individuals come to differentiate the "ordinary person" from the "media person" (2004, p. 1082). Therefore, I argue that weddings have come to be a venue that constructs, at least temporarily, celebrities out of ordinary people. As part of the consumer culture of today, individuals are wooed to make a spectacle of themselves in their wedding.

Popular culture plays a significant role in shaping wedding desires. In her consideration of the "wedding-industrial complex" and its use of pervasive media images, Ingraham (2008) indicated that the purpose of the mass media is to provide the community with information and materials that help shape our outlook on the world, ourselves and the values we adhere to. Couldry (2004) similarly suggested that media provides an access to social reality. The staging of weddings in television dramas, reports on celebrity or exclusive working-class weddings in the press, as well as advertising all work together to influence how individuals think about weddings.

Boden (2003) uses the term “wedding industry” to refer to the opportunities presented to consumers to achieve the wedding they desire, along with the methods employed to generate these desires in the first place⁵⁴. It plays a role in articulating and sustaining a wedding consumer culture. The emphasis on “the perfect wedding” and standards of perfection are created by bridal magazines, advertisers and the media – couples are urged to step outside of traditional constraints and consume unique services to reflect who they are and what they believe.

Part of the display of self is the presentation of the couple’s “creativity” and sense of aesthetics through designing their wedding. Individuals endeavor to leave their personal imprints on their wedding. The incorporation of do-it-yourself (DIY) elements into the wedding appears to be a modern trend. Noticing that the modern bride and groom are ever more involved in their own wedding was Jenny,

“I have friends who just got married, colleagues who are younger than me. They are very involved in their own weddings. They hand made the door gifts, and they made their own cards. Do stamping and whatever. They are all hand-made. They don’t use the one-stop shops because they do everything themselves. I was very surprised, but I think they enjoyed the process.” – Married for 12 years.

More and more couples now aspire to have their own unique and meaningful wedding affairs. A number of my younger informants self-designed wedding inserts for their church ceremonies, as well as prepared handmade corsages and wedding favors. In fact, one of them personally printed every self-designed invite for her solemnization ceremony because she found it to be more meaningful. Besides DIY elements, couples are including personal articles into their weddings. While one of my informants brought along her soft toys for her pre-wedding indoor photo shoot, another opted to use her own “pound puppies”⁵⁵ plaything for her bridal car

⁵⁴ The wedding industry includes the media, bridal magazines, Internet wedding sites, wedding exhibitions, wedding professionals, service providers, etc.

⁵⁵ Pound puppies are a kind of toy that was popular in the early 1990s.

embellishment (see PLATE 1.5). One can perhaps argue that the inclusion of intimate and “private” articles such as soft toys and childhood playthings in wedding consumption builds certain continuity between childhood dreams, fantasy and romance. A bridge is created connecting the consumption of specific articles and the emulation of ideals of romanticism, fantasy and individualism. Given the emphasis on meaningful weddings, personal items were included due to their significance value. Many were in fact employed due to their exclusiveness. As Carina (married for three years) pointed out, many newly-weds take pride in being unique, “My husband is very proud of his music. He chose a seldom played march in song and he still talks about it today. My colleague was surprised he knew that song even.” Hence, couples inscribe different kinds of value or individuality into their weddings via the consumption of exclusive things. Significance and exclusiveness are not incompatible; they mutually reinforce one another, as things that are personally significant are likely to be exclusive.

The expression of individuality can lead couples to attempt to do something really unusual. For instance, Straits Times recounted a new wedding photography concept called Trash the Dress (TTD). In contrast to the “clichéd ‘pose-and-look-lovey-dovey’ style of wedding photography” (*Straits Times*, 27 June 2010), it was reported that “to stand out, some wedding couples are opting to destroy bridal outfits during photo shoots”. Explaining the rationale behind her destroying her gown at her pre-wedding photo shoot was a 25-year-old bride-to-be Ms. Rosilah. She said, “I wanted something unique and wild. The normal style of wedding photography offered by most bridal boutiques is boring. So I took up the challenge to trash my dress.” In a separate *Straits Times* feature on 10th October 2010, a wedding

PLATE 1.5 Pound puppies plaything for bridal car embellishment



photographer Mr. Tuck Hong said, “Many clients are tired of the same old wedding pictures and are looking at having something refreshing, unique and captivating.”

Archives can be understood as a standard repository of ideas in which the younger generation is now in negotiation; they see themselves as drawing on it in a non-standard way. The notion that more and more Singaporean Chinese couples are replacing the ceremonious wedding affair of the past with their own personal wedding affairs was highlighted by a wedding specialist, Ada,

“As the population gets from one generation to another generation, the emphasis of weddings shifts a little. In the past, the emphasis was more of how many outfits a bride wore and/ or how thick the photo album was or how grand the dinner venue was, etc. For the future, I believe it will be more of how individual a wedding is to the couple. A wedding is likely to be less showy and more personal; our clients these days are more concerned about how comfortable they feel wearing the gowns rather than how ostentatious they appear to look.”

Working in the bridal retail business, Ada suggested that nowadays newlyweds are gradually placing less emphasis on just how extravagant their weddings appear – a wedding ideal of the past. Instead, the bride and groom seek to personalize their weddings in relation to their subjective inclinations, and in view of the media, local wedding scene and global fashion. The emphasis in the wedding ceremony has thus shifted to embody a display of self. Therefore, other than tapping on archived traditions of the past and replicating what was done before, the contemporary perfect wedding incorporates something new and entirely unique vis-à-vis one’s contemporaries. It connects traditions with something totally the couple’s own. As Twenge (2006) suggested, weddings were no longer about rules, but about individual expression. For their weddings to be meaningful and personal, many of my young informants were stepping outside traditional constraints and doing away with various emblematic wedding practices which themselves became part of a “Singapore tradition”. Components such as champagne pouring, cake cutting and the three cheers

of *yum sheng* – activities which grew to be expected of the Singaporean Chinese wedding in post-colonial Singapore, were specifically left out by some of my younger informants due to personal preferences or the conviction that they were not imperative. Very often, these couples question the necessity of holding a traditional wedding banquet. In particular, Lyn felt there was no need to hold a conventional wedding banquet in a hotel and eventually had a solemnization ceremony followed by a high tea buffet at the Singapore Art Museum instead. She explained her choice,

“We wanted to make the wedding really our own, so we did most of the things the non-traditional way... We didn’t have a wedding banquet because we both felt that there was no meaning following the hotel's proceedings. Every wedding followed the same things and it was predictable and uninteresting to us, and the bride had to keep changing until she won’t have time to eat or interact with the guests. And we didn’t feel it was necessary to invite people whom we don't know a.k.a our parents' friends. We wanted it to be more personal.” – Married for six months.

Instead of engaging their parents’ associates, the present-day wedding tends to be held in reserve for the couple’s own personal network. The young are also more likely to negotiate their wedding choices to demonstrate individual expression. This negotiation pertains not just to traditions, but also in regards to contemporary wedding expectations and fashion. The young today are exposed to information from diverse sources; they are provided with the opportunity to turn to a range of resources for information and inspiration. Exposure to global fashion, wedding features and advertisements contribute towards contemporary wedding ideals. Referring to Crane (2000) and Kawamura (2005), who studied the social nature of fashion, Blaszczyk highlighted that fashion is the product of “deliberation, conflict and negotiation within a complex network of institutions and individuals” (2008, p. 9). Fashion both draws sustenance from human interactions and influences them. In the construction of their own unique and meaningful individualized wedding affairs, Chinese brides and

grooms have much power to shape the parameters of what is fashionable today and for tomorrow.

In the effort to demonstrate individuality or the unique self, some couples are breaking away from tradition and re-creating their own wedding ideals. In the past many guests arrived at a Chinese banquet late as a form of courtesy as they did not wish to appear greedy. Freedman's (1957) study of the Singaporean Chinese wedding in the 1950s suggested that the wedding feast tended to commence late; those at the table were reluctant to start without the missing guests and an actual start of the dinner only took place when a majority of the guests had arrived. This continues to be an unspoken etiquette in many contemporary Chinese wedding banquets; both of the wedding banquets I observed commenced late (while the invitation stated that the dinner would be served at 7.30pm, one of them commenced only at 8.45pm). What was considered to be "good manners" according to Chinese tradition does not appear so to some of my younger informants. For instance, Zoe felt that starting a wedding banquet promptly was considerate behavior, and applied the belief to her own wedding,

"The real solemnization started at 7.30pm. We told them [guests] we would start at 7.15pm, but gave them more time by showing them the video before the ceremony. It was very important to use this as an event to encourage people to be punctual... Because when I was young, whenever I go for wedding ceremonies, we always had to wait for people. By doing so, you penalize people who are early for those who are late, and the whole dinner would end very late. That was why we hope in the wedding, my wedding itself, it would commence on time. It was something that I really wanted since I was young. I wanted everybody to be punctual and I wanted it to be joyous." – Married for four-and-a-half years.

During the distribution of the wedding invitations, Zoe and her husband reinforced to their guests that their banquet would commence promptly and in effect told them it would start 15 minutes ahead of the scheduled time. Ultimately, with more than 80%

of the guests arriving before the event started, the couple succeeded in influencing their guests to arrive promptly. One can speculate about these changing customs that in the past food itself was valued, so arriving late was seen as an appropriate form of good manners, to not appear like one was trying to get more than others; however in the present era, since “time is money”, promptness is increasingly valued. If, as Bromley suggests, “the impression we usually wish to convey is our personal identity or self-concept” (1993, p. 111), then the modern wedding is a display of the personal identities and beliefs of the bride and groom. Instead of thoughtlessly submitting to doctrines and “archives” of yesterday, the younger generation is developing their own wedding ideals today and in this way potentially constructing archives of the future. This suggests that wedding couples do negotiate wedding archives as well as their relationships with the past and present in an endeavour to convey a wedding spectacle and express individuality.

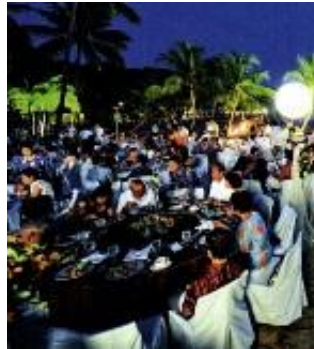
Globalization today has resulted in the extension of trends beyond geographical boundaries; the themed wedding is one such trend. In line with the desire to break away from tradition and create something different, themed weddings appear to be on the rise. Considered one of the most recent trends in the wedding industry (McNeil 2004), such weddings are commonly portrayed through the mass media. For instance, Style Weddings did a 39-page feature on 26 real themed weddings in their September 2009 – February 2010 issue. An extract on one featured wedding stated,

“Katherine has always dreamed of a beach wedding, so when Wee Siong proposed, they decided to tie the knot at Beach Culture @ Watercross in Pasir Ris Park... For a breezy ‘rest-and-relax’ celebration, the couple decided on a ‘Hawaiian’ theme, with a dress code listing bermudas, flip-flops and T-shirts. To prep guests for the party, the couple sent out e-invitations with caricatures of themselves dressed in Hawaiian outfits.”

Typically, as the above excerpt show, ‘themed weddings’ denotes the use of a certain pattern or idea that guides the overall ceremony (see PLATE 1.6). This is reinforced in Sivemalar Krishnan’s (2008) academic study on the motivations of New Zealanders behind conducting themed weddings. Themes are more personalized and individualistic; they break away from tradition and involve the making of something new. Krishnan (2008, p. 13) contends that wedding themes are an “essential ingredient” in creating a personal and unforgettable wedding experience. In her work on cultural displays, Dicks (2003) went further to consider theming as a particular technique used in the modern world to make things more “legible”. By theming their wedding, the couple are displaying themselves and trying to reinforce their “legibility”. Having a theme is a manifestation of individual choice – the application of such a concept enables the couple to manage an expression of whatever they wish, from their beliefs and likes, to their roots and fantasies. In doing so, a theme perhaps takes the place of “custom”. Archived culture offers some uniformity in how weddings are performed across society, whereas a theme introduces consistency within a wedding and legibility to the display of self.

Therefore, wedding choices related to traditions, expectations and fashion are being negotiated as more and more newlyweds do away with ceremonious rituals of the past and construct their own perfect wedding spectacles. A flurry of activities are wooing people into marriage and feeding into their desire to put on a display of themselves through their weddings. Besides prompting people to make a spectacle of themselves, global fashion, the local wedding industry and the consumer orientation of the modern wedding work together to provide them with opportunities to achieve the wedding they desire. The wedding is fashioned to be a display of self and individuality. As they go about doing so, the younger generation is creating modern

PLATE 1.6 Themed weddings (Beach party and Hawaiian)⁵⁶



⁵⁶ These photographs are obtained from Style: Weddings Issue 14 Sep 09 – Feb 10.

ideals and rituals, as well as potentially constructing archives that future generations can tap into for generating their own wedding ideals and in the making of their perfect wedding.

Documenting Weddings through Photography

The nature and emphasis of the wedding photograph has changed markedly over time. In contrast to the professional photos of the past, wedding photography is ever more a negotiated project for archiving mediated wedding “memories” today; the bridal couple are active participants who in constructing their “celebrity” self-image or wedding experience create their own lived realities. In this way, the “reality” captured by the photograph is subject to how individuals choose to present themselves in front of a camera and what “memories” they decide to retain. Through the wedding photograph, we can see how this “reality” is preserved, and how the modern wedding is fashioned to be a spectacle or display of self, emulating the ideals of romanticism, fantasy and individualism. It opens discussion on how the wedding has come to be executed and negotiated in the present day.

The wedding photograph has been “as much a part of the ceremony as the prescribed verbal formulas” for at least a century (Sontag 1977, p. 8). The inclusion of some form of wedding photography as part of the wedding ritual was evident across my informants. It was generally agreed that it is a common practice to take some form of professional wedding photographs amongst the Singapore Chinese, be it a few formal studio portraits (taken on the wedding day itself) that served as proof of the couple’s marriage in the earlier days or the contemporary wide-ranging string of wedding photographs. In early society, photographs were costly, and wedding-day photographs were often prized possessions proudly displayed on the walls of the room

where guests were greeted. They were the prime objects of display, both at that moment of time and for the future. Rapid urbanization in the post-independence years, coupled with technological developments, made cameras mass-produced household objects, and this permitted what Adrian referred to as the “democratization of the photograph” (2003, p. 43). Working-class families were able to store wedding snapshots in small books of clear plastic sleeves, alongside other genres of photographs. The very recent invention of digital photography since the late 20th century further enabled the collection of a large amount of archival documents within a short duration of time. Also, it empowered individuals with greater convenience and flexibility to delete unnecessary photos, store desired photos on a personal computer and only print required photos. With technological developments, digital wedding albums are progressively uploaded onto social networking websites and\ or in wedding blogs. This trend was noted by a photographer, who remarked that “with the digital age, newlyweds actually prefer to keep the soft copy of images so that they are able to share with their friends on the Internet”. Hence, technological advancements shaped the use of and permitted different ways of keeping the wedding photograph (on walls of the entry room, physical albums, to the Internet).

Two categories of wedding photographs are prevalent nowadays amongst the Singaporean Chinese – pre-wedding and wedding-day photographs. The former refers to a set of photographs taken prior to the wedding day, typically as part of a wedding package offered by the bridal shop. These involve the prospective couple having their photographs taken by a professional photographer in their agreed choice of wedding attires, poses and destinations (overseas locations, local outdoor sites or indoor settings). A subset from the entire series of photographs taken is selected for

the pre-wedding album⁵⁷ – carefully chosen by the couple themselves, these images are perceived to capture their most “perfect self-image”,

“I’ve seen friends pre-wedding shots, and they look so beautiful in the photographs. I guess I’m also a person who likes photography and a wedding is a rare opportunity where one gets to look the prettiest with your loved one, so having a beautiful pre-wedding album is a very precious thing to keep.” – Joyce, Married for 7 years.

The couple seeks to construct and present their best appearance for and on the wedding day. Pre-wedding photographs are often associated with terms having affirmative connotations, including “beautiful” and “prettiest”. Such images are often produced only after painstaking styling, shooting, lighting and retouching, as well as with a series of props, backdrops, gowns and cameras. These elaborate presentations of the self developed in Singapore as photography became cheaper and easier and as the focus of the wedding shifted more and more to a glamorization of romance and the married couple.

While pre-wedding images tend to be staged and perfect, wedding-day snapshots comparatively encompass greater spontaneity and record events as they transpire (refer to PLATES 1.7 and 1.8). Photographer(s) follow the couple as they carry out the wedding day rituals, for example, the collection of the bride, wedding banquet, etc. Perhaps because they seek to capture different things, actors render different importance towards wedding-day and pre-wedding photographs. Many found the former more meaningful on account of its “naturalness”. Married for 7 years, Mabel suggested, “We were more willing to splurge on actual day photography because we want more natural shots rather than posed shots.” There is a tension between wanting to capture the feelings and spontaneous moments, as opposed to those of the postured “perfect” selves; individuals negotiate their partialities for the

⁵⁷ As part of the wedding package, the couple is usually entitled to a certain quantity of photographs for the pre-wedding album.

PLATE 1.7 Pre-wedding shots⁵⁸



⁵⁸ These photographs are obtained from Style: Weddings Issue 14 Sep 09 – Feb 10.

PLATE 1.8 Wedding-day shots⁵⁹



⁵⁹ These photographs are obtained from Style: Weddings Issue 14 Sep 09 – Feb 10.

two categories of photographs – some might invest more time and money on one category over the other. Interestingly, the treatment of the wedding-day photograph has changed over time. As opposed to wedding-day photos of the past, which were the prime objects of display in relation to weddings and valued for their family history functions, today's wedding-day photographs hardly receive prominent display once a wedding fades into memory. While they have moved beyond serving as evidence of the wedding in the way wedding-day photographs functioned in the past, pre-wedding snapshots are more likely to be hung upon household walls as a manner of public display.

Although the contrast between the “staged” pre-wedding photographs and the more spontaneous wedding day photos is often commented on by informants, this is not to say that wedding-day photographs are wholly unprompted or authentic; certain “candid” shots taken during the wedding day may too be staged. As Zhen Ling (married for four years) said, “I had a veil on the customary day, but it was just posing for fun for the camera”. While they may preserve a view of “the way things were” (Chalfen 1987), wedding-day photographic images are not entirely life as it is really lived. Photographs divulge only a version of lived realities. Many things are left out in photographs; there are various forms of patterned eliminations. This can be seen in how Ling (married for 6 years) lamented that there were no photographs of the tasty food available during her wedding ceremony. The frequent photographing of food may well be a phenomenon which arose together with the adoption of digital cameras and media. While the number of food photos on websites, blogs and photo sharing sites is growing at a face pace, they appear to be commonly left out in wedding photography. Also, although weddings often receive multiple-camera attention, rarely do we see scenes of crying and related moments of unease, or minor

arguments over details of protocol or banquet plans. Neither do we find photographs of the wedding run through or other important preparations. At large, snapshots of the constructed wedding front are included, while that of back stage behavior and preparations tend to be left out⁶⁰. Photographs are the result of an active signifying practice in which media-makers select, structure and shape what is to be registered on film and further alter and edit what is eventually printed (Hall 1982). Cameras are devices that can only capture a certain scope of things; that is, there is a limit as to what can be included in a picture. Thus, only particular kinds of existence and experiences are being documented and certified in photographs. It is pertinent to note that any concept of symbolic representation must acknowledge the presence of a structured series of choices and meaningful decisions regarding inclusion and exclusion (Chalfen 1987). These choices and decisions are manifested in the camera's position and distance from the object to be photographed, the specified angle in which the photographer holds the camera, and so forth. In addition, features such as scene and function modes can affect the outcome of a picture as well. Hence, photographic images and what comes to be archived are subject to how people want to look at a specific spectrum of their lives with cameras, and how they choose to present themselves in front of an operating camera.

Perhaps, as Adrian suggested, what makes photography unique is not its ability to document reality, but its tendency to “mediate and manipulate reality while passing the photograph off as Truth” (2003, p. 205). Most couples desire a beautiful set of memories translated by way of photographic images as such visual documentation augments the display of the “perfect self” and notion of the “perfect wedding”. In order to do so, photographic images should document what is unique,

⁶⁰ Occasionally, a handful of snapshots of exemplary back stage actions that had to do with constructing the wedding front were uploaded to wedding blogs or social networking websites.

fun and beautiful, as opposed to what went wrong. Photographs are duty-bound to preserve the fantastical self-image the couple wishes to retain. Therefore the wedding photographer does not simply represent reality as it is, but has to present an “enhanced version” of it (Mead 2007, p. 176). This is particularly true for the bride, who often does not look like herself in the pre-wedding portraits due to the elaborate make-up, manipulation of the lighting, and final retouching. Ideally, she is to be made to look flawless and as stunning as a professional model or celebrity. Additionally presentation in photographs is not simply physical, but also creates an image of the couple’s relationship; they are always set up to pose in intimate and romantic ways. The fantasy worlds depicted in bridal photographs reflect not necessarily the personal fantasies of the bride and groom, but the social fantasies portrayed in the media and by the wedding industry (Adrian 2003). Thus the wedding photograph exemplifies how the modern wedding is fashioned to be a spectacle or display of self, emulating the ideals of romanticism, fantasy and individualism.

Photography is generally perceived as a means of documenting and preserving a view of “the way things were” (Chalfen 1987). It thus allows one to archive wedding memories of the present into the future,

“I would think wedding photography is important because you need to catch on photo your radiant moment. I mean, these photographs are something that you can keep and pass down to your children to show them. It is a memory that you need to have photos to keep. There is no point in having a wedding without photos, because you cannot remember what happened. It is also good for your future generations.”
– June, Married for 32 years.

“It goes without saying that couples want visual memories of themselves together, especially for their wedding. Brides want to be at their most beautiful on that day, and therefore these portraits also serve as memories of beauty and (in most cases) youth.” - Photographer

Many treasure their photographic images because they are deemed to be able to capture the “authenticity” of their experiences and show what took place. In

particular, the pre-wedding photographs enable individuals to “remember” their youthful good looks and “perfect self-image” when they mature. Married two years ago, Huizhen therefore warranted that photos allow one to “relive the moments and reflect how you have changed after being someone's wife”. It becomes essential to have pre-wedding photographs to stand as evidence of what the couple looked like at that point in time. The use of text or captions alongside photographic images enriches the memories of a couple’s wedding. The choice of language is significant in the representation and understanding of what took place. Explaining why she added captions next to the wedding photos she posted on social networking website *Facebook* two-and-a-half years ago, Lilian said, “I always believe we won't remember everything, especially when we are old. So, such description will help to trigger the feelings.”

While three decades ago a wedding image might be circulated to selected relatives as evidence of the couple’s marriage, today images are distributed to wedding guests as a visual keepsake due to its widely established memoire quality. The following extract from *Her World Brides – Wedding Albums* demonstrates how photographs may be drawn upon to enhance a wedding,

“Pictures of the celebrations were instantly projected on a screen, printed and handed out to the happy guests. The couple hired a photographer to set up a ‘photo booth’, and guests kept receiving shots the photographer had taken of them through the night. ‘They were so happy and everyone kept taking snapshots! Each guest brought home a stack of pictures that night,’ recalls Yvonne [the bride] fondly. Indeed, a meaningful memento for a perfect wedding.”

Besides instant projection of images, technological advancements make it possible for small disposable cameras to be handed out to guests so that they can take their own photos and capture the wedding experience. A professional photographer I interviewed adopted the stance that photographs preserve memories of the perfect

wedding and the “perfect self-image”, saying “The popular belief is that wedding photographs are priceless visual memories of the most beautiful day of our lives.” Therefore, wedding photography has an essential link to the whole construction of “the most beautiful day” and “perfect wedding”. The photograph is a documentation of the wedding; it is a place individuals archive memories of the present into the future.

A professional photographer related to me, “In reality, wedding photographs hold different levels of significance for different couples.” It is not to be expected that individual viewers will hold a fixed set of meanings towards the same picture through time. Arjun Appadurai (1986) contended, just like persons, commodities have social lives. The wedding photograph has a social life and its significance varies across time along with the experiences of individuals. While wedding photography may be considered imperative to a bride and groom in the early phases of their marriage, this emphasis may shift to visual documentations of other significant moments of their shared life later. On the other hand, one particular wedding photograph generated renewed significance for Robert (married for 30 years) because it documented the image of his now deceased grandmother. This is consistent with the anthropologist Richard Chalfen’s study of home media; he contended the same picture may invoke different meanings to an actor at different times because the accumulation of experience has “produced a repertoire of viewing and interpretive conventions” (1987, p. 122). From the view of symbolic interactionism, social processes and events revolve around the self, and the particular times and spaces individuals inhabit influence the meanings and understanding they have of these events.

In addition to recording the object(s) being photographed, the paper-based photographic image is itself a display of wedding consumption. A wedding is a consumption-oriented rite of passage upon which much effort and time have been exhausted. While reminiscing about his wedding held 30 years ago via his wedding album⁶¹, Robert remarked, “This is good film. I think it is Kodak [*he took a photo out from its plastic sleeve to verify*]. See? This is very expensive and the quality is very good. Other than the banquet, we spent a lot of money on this album.” Kodak has been long known for producing imaging and photographic materials and equipment; consistent with Robert’s belief, the use of Kodak-produced paper for photo printing three decades ago was an emblem of the considerable money he expended on the wedding-day photography. While wedding-day photographs were generally recognized to be more meaningful because of their “naturalness”, the pre-wedding album is correspondingly valued by some newlyweds precisely because it showcases wedding consumption,

“Pre-wedding albums have long become a showcase for wedding receptions. In many cases, the pre-wedding album is a way to show everyone that their wedding is different from others.” – Photographer

“Many pre-wedding albums are created as a showcase during the wedding. The albums become more important when the wedding is built around a theme, for example, a Shanghai or Western theme, and every prop and display become significant to the intended wedding experience.” – Photographer

The display of the pre-wedding album at the wedding reception grew to be a practice expected of the Singaporean Chinese wedding towards the end of the twentieth century. Doing so enhances the display of the couple and enables one to underline the exclusivity behind the wedding performance. For instance, Lilian and her husband (married for two-and-a-half years) adore travelling and outdoor sports, and chose to

⁶¹ This album comprised formal studio portraits and photographs of the traditional wedding banquet, both taken on the wedding day.

have their pre-wedding photos taken at places based on their interest⁶². These photos were displayed at her wedding reception, reinforcing their distinctive “sporty” theme; as opposed to a guest book, invitees signed their best wishes on various netballs. Similarly, wedding-day snapshots document wedding consumption and its inference to personal individuality. In this way, other than the keeping of the perfect wedding and perfect self-image, wedding photography serves as “a means to capture images of the material production upon which so much thought, time, and money have been expended” (Mead 2007, p. 181).

Hence, wedding photographs embody value; individuals attach different kinds of personal meanings to them and such significance may vary across time. They become part of the negotiated project for recording and archiving “memories”, and give us a glimpse of how the modern wedding is fashioned to be a display of self, emulating the ideals of romanticism, fantasy and individualism.

Information Technology and the Modern Archivist

We are seeing a move away from the traditional concept of archive as a physical place for storing of materials (photographs) to the archive as a virtual site facilitating instant data access and feedback (the Internet). In his exploration of contemporary variations of the concept of archive, Michael Lynch asserted that a website has “the potential to turn a body of documentary evidence into a ‘popular archive’ subjected to mass visitation, reproduction and dissemination” (Lynch and Bogen 1996 quoted in Lynch 1999, p. 76). Information technology, new media and the Internet have thus extended the ability of archives to enable contemporary individuals to both expediently consult digital wedding archives and to become

⁶² These places comprised a netball centre, Changi Sea Sports Club and Changi Airport. Photographs were taken with the couple donned in their wedding outfits (postured) and sports attire (spontaneous).

archivists of their own weddings. Beyond being a place of storage, this section contends that the modern electronic archive is a place that encapsulates the many tensions that are being manoeuvred in the lives of Singaporeans, including the modern archivist's relationship with the past, the present and the future, the struggle between ideals of individualism versus the collectivity and those of the traditional versus the new and revolutionary. These modern archives also see the merging of the "private" and the "public".

Being a contemporary medium that was not available to the general Singapore public until 1994 (Lee 2001), the Internet has created new ways for people to communicate, gather and share information today. As a wedding planner Zhen held, "If you compare our generation with the past, we are more knowledgeable. We can use the Internet now – simply type 'weddings' and an entire list of information is generated." A repository of wedding archives is available via the Internet today. As part of their wedding preparation, many individuals are turning to wedding sites and forums as resources for information and inspiration. For instance, a forum participant Jessica and my informant Susan suggested that the website *Singapore Brides Forum* provided much valued information to them,

"Am going to sign the package deal with them [bridal shop] for \$3388. They received good reviews from the forum! It really pays to do your homework, as you know what to look out for and how to get the best deal." – Jessica; 6 October 2009, 4.19am

"Forum is extremely helpful because you get to know the true experience and firsthand information from others who've gone through the actual thing themselves. I did refer to other online resources, but the majority of the information I got is still from the forum itself. Before we decided to invite our solemnizer for our event, I did read through all the comments about him and even watched a video of him solemnizing another couple online. It is extremely useful in helping us making the decision." – Susan, Married for three years

Both women felt that the *Singapore Brides Forum* provided immediate, up-to-date information, and they construed a good forum appraisal to a right decision made. In addition to textual and pictorial information, new recording technologies allow streaming videos to be disseminated and reproduced for the public's reference via the World Wide Web. Similar to Susan and Jessica, many of my younger informants tapped into wedding archives on the Internet as part of their "background homework" to garner wedding-related material or inspiration. No longer simply a literal place in which a collection of documents are kept for commemoration, the Internet as archive now has the potential to ease the exchange of information in a society of consumers wherein life projects are fashioned around consumer choices. The boundaries of the archive have thus been widened; it has developed to encompass a virtual site facilitating instant data access and feedback.

There is a tension implicit in why individuals draw upon the virtual repository of wedding archives. We see how Singaporeans negotiate their self-identity and social relationships with computer technology and the Internet via electronic archives on weddings. To begin with, the relative anonymity of Internet interactions greatly reduces the risks of self-disclosure and provides for greater intimacy and closeness. This special quality of Internet communication is evident through the forum post of a user of the *Singapore Brides Forum*, who used the medium to convey her apprehensions over her relationship, "I don't really talk about it to anyone except here maybe it's more comfortable facing a computer I guess..." Valerian Derlega and Alan Chaikin, who studied privacy and self-disclosure in social relationships, posit that individuals tend not to engage in self-disclosure with one another until they are certain that they have formed a "dyadic boundary", ensuring that information revealed by one is not leaked by the other to mutual associates (1977, p. 104). Individuals may share

intimate aspects of the self with online acquaintances with much less fear of violating the dyadic boundary, and of disapproval and sanction, as online acquaintances are less likely to have access to the individual's social circle.

On the other hand, there are individuals who negotiate an orientation towards the collective via new electronic archives. For example, my informant Mabel lamented not using the Internet to source for "collective wisdom" for her wedding held 12 years ago, "Now to think of it, I didn't really make use of those online wedding preparation portal/ forum – should be able to tap on collective wisdom from those forums." This quote illustrates the way Singaporeans negotiate their relationship to a collectivity via weddings. The unique structure of Internet forums allows individuals to easily find others who share similar backgrounds or characteristics, or specialized interests. All the more, it provides individuals with a platform to make new friends and maintain interpersonal interactions. An examination of a thread under the *Singapore Brides Forum* confirmed this notion⁶³. For instance, a group of contributors under the "Any Brides Whose HTB [husband-to-be] is 'Ang Mo' [a Caucasian]?" thread demonstrated sustained interaction. These women started conversing via the thread while they were preparing for their cross-cultural weddings in Singapore in early 2006, and continued doing so till today. Besides providing advice to new contributors, they talked about their meet-ups, updated each other on their lives outside of or within Singapore, and discussed about their children and husband. They arranged face-to-face gatherings via the forum and eventually became friends. As opposed to transient relationships, bonds arising from computer-mediated interpersonal communication can be enduring (albeit in strange ways). Hence, having a shared attribute allows members to move quickly forward to

⁶³ The forum comprised topics such as the wedding day sequence, customary marriage customs, consumption of goods and services, etc.

explore what other key characteristics or interests they might share, and may provide a head start to relationships. In addition to empowering individuals to draw upon digital wedding archives conveniently, changes in information technology makes it possible for two otherwise unacquainted individuals to collectively share and forge interpersonal interactions in their everyday lives; friendship can be forged. Thus, there is a tension here between Internet-based technologies being platforms that isolate and accord users anonymity, and them being mediums that connect and facilitate social relationships amongst like-minded people.

By providing individuals with a new means to share what they are doing, the Internet is capable of capturing a permanent record of an event. New information technologies expand our capacity to archive everything. More and more brides-to-be are thus creating their own wedding websites or blogs, and in the process becoming archivists of their own wedding events. Doing so allows the documentation of present consumption sequences and experiences for future reference,

“Back in 2007 when I was preparing for our wedding, I chanced upon quite a number of online wedding websites created by other brides on Singaporebride.com. That made me think that maybe it is not a bad idea to start our own wedding website... To me, I think the significance is that, many, many years down the road, when we both are getting older and older, we might not remember every detail about our wedding but at least we have this site here. I am sure we will enjoy reading it again at that time.” – Susan, Married for three years.

Similarly, many of my informants perceived human recollection to be imperfect, whilst the contemporary variation of the archive – in the form of wedding blogs or websites, is alleged to be an everlasting record of one’s memories. Regular photo albums also enable a record of memories and serve as a medium that retains the “perfect wedding” through and intended for the couple. But as compared to the image-based regular album, the electronic archive is able to capture written text,

images, videos, hyperlinks, audio materials and emoticons⁶⁴. The construction of information in various forms makes the wedding blog or website a more “revealing” and all-encompassing repository of memories than the regular album.

Drawing on Couldry’s (2004) discussion of media rituals, one can perhaps also deduce that individuals are actively exposing their private lives on the Internet because of the desire to be a public personality. It contributes to the display of self in the public eye. Besides being a personal memoir, an archive of the wedding process might very well be intended for retrieval by the wider online community. The electronic archive is drawn upon as one of the sites for the accumulation of records because it facilitates instant data access and feedback. This point was brought up succinctly by Carina when she spoke about her digital wedding album,

“These pictures comprised friends from different stages of my life. They wanted to see the photos I took with them at the wedding banquet and develop [them] themselves, so I posted for them to download. The next one was that of my ‘brothers’ and real sisters, so the same thing – I posted online to let my husband’s ‘brothers’ have access to the picture.”
– Married for three years.

The Internet has transformed the way actors communicate and share information; large amounts of textual, imagistic and oral materials are digitized and held in electronic databases around the world. Blogging, for instance, enables more people “to write for global audiences, transforming users from mass consumers to mass communicators (Dominick 1999, as quoted in Sima and Pugsley 2010, p. 288). On a similar note, Susan wished for her wedding website to be a source of information for other brides. She said, “Instead of making it a photo album site, which is what many others did, I decided to make it a more informative site which can help other brides eventually.” Embedded in this documentation of weddings is the idea of helping/ sharing/ creating a community of brides. Typical of other wedding portals, Susan’s

⁶⁴ Emoticons refer to facial expressions pictorially represented by punctuation and letters.

website enables customized and convenient access to information, as reflected in themes such as ‘Checklist’, ‘Ideas for Brides’, ‘Video Clips’ and ‘Our Vendors’. Being subjected to mass visitation, reproduction and dissemination, the power of the popular archive on the future-to-come becomes boundless – it appeals to Internet users conceivable weddings they themselves could model on in the future.

Akin to physical places like photo albums, as well as public displays of wedding paraphernalia and the “old style” wedding, the Internet is a place wherein a cultural repository of Chinese weddings is put on display. It is a way of archiving information and knowledge, and a way of constructing the past. This can be seen via the thread “Actual day – what should happen?” of the *Singapore Brides Forum*,

Author	Message
linda (gregda)	<p>Posted on Saturday, October 07, 2006 - 2:02 pm:</p> <p>Hi Everyone,</p> <p>I had intended to hold a tea ceremony at my church wedding. However, my parents-in-law (PIL) suggested holding the tea ceremony at an earlier date, because the family is very big and they are afraid that there is insufficient time. Our actual wedding day (AD) would be around late 2007, and my mother-in-law thought of holding the tea ceremony sometime this year.</p> <p>My concern is if this is the right procedure? I assume that tea ceremony is only done during the AD. I am alright if the tea ceremony is held one day before AD, but now, it is one year ahead! To me, it serves no purpose and no symbolic meaning.</p> <p>Please advise me as to whether this kind of arrangement is right and if it is not, how do I go about telling them? I am really not keen on this idea, whereas future husband (FH) is neutral about it.</p>
minssy (minssy)	<p>Posted on Saturday, October 07, 2006 - 11:17 pm:</p> <p>Hi Linda,</p> <p>Haha, it is so weird to have tea ceremony and the church wedding on dates so far apart! Tea and church ceremonies need to be on the same day.</p>

Suggestions:

1) Whole morning: gate crashing at your place, then to his house for tea ceremony + buffet. Everything to end say by 1pm, then have your church ceremony at say, 3pm. Dinner will have to be on another day, else you will be dead beat and you will have no time.

2) Your FH is the 'gate keeper'. He needs to tell your PIL that logistics need to be smooth. Having buffet at another relative's house means so much more logistic nightmares for everybody. Cajole him to be more on your side 😊

linda (gregda)

Posted on Sunday, October 08, 2006 - 2:24 pm:

Hi Minssy,

Thanks for your advice and reply! I was so relieved to see your reply because I don't really know if it can be done that way. With your reply, I am sure now. ;)

What do you think of the following AD arrangement:

- 1) Gate crashing at my place
- 2) Proceed to church ceremony, 10 – 11am
- 3) Tea ceremony for FH's side in church, 11am – 12pm
- 4) Buffet reception for relatives in church, 12pm-2pm; FH and I leave first (my family and relatives also need to leave to go back to my place)
- 5) Reach our new place to go through some practices, 1 – 1.30pm
- 6) Reach my mum's place for tea ceremony, 2 - 3pm
- 7) Reach hotel for dinner banquet preparations by 4pm, and go through rehearsals
- 8) Make-up artiste to reach by 5pm
- 9) Guests to reach at 7pm for cocktail
- 10) Dinner starts between 7.30 - 8pm and ends around 11pm

I am worried that if we hold it on two days, it will be very troublesome.

minssy (minssy)

Posted on Sunday, October 08, 2006 - 4:08 pm:

Hi Linda,

So you will be holding your tea ceremony in church? If yes, greenlight must be obtained because some old folks do not like the idea. But it will be easier for logistics as there will be less fetching around etc.

Please try to end your day activities by 2pm or latest 3pm? You need the time in the noon for refreshing/ packing/ preparing for night. If you end too late, everyone will be really tired.

Anyway, your AD is so far away, have the skeleton out first. The timing will be revised like 1000 times along the way when you think of something new.

And by the way, dinner will NEVER start at 7.30pm. Its Singapore, you know? 😊

The dialogue above suggests that the electronic archive is likened to a repository wherein information on “what’s right” or “what used to be” is produced and gleaned. Being the place for the accumulation of records, it was where Linda acquired information about the “right procedure” for the wedding day (that church and tea ceremonies should be held within the same day). Interestingly, this electronic archive reinforced that Chinese banquets never start promptly at 7.30pm – the time wedding invitations normally indicate. One can speculate from this that people replicate and reproduce cultural knowledge via the Internet. With massive improvements in the speed and mobility of access to information, contemporary society is undergoing the ‘digitalization of culture’ (Featherstone 2000). In this way, archives are places of public display of the private, of private continuation of the public (culture). The electronic archive becomes a commandment for the future, guiding people to continue to do things in the norms of culture.

Derrida’s idea that archives are “at once institutive and conservative” (1996, p. 7) helps us to recognize that there is a constant struggle in the lives of Singaporeans between the past, the present and the future, with the ideas of “what’s right” and “what used to be”, with “what’s possible” and “what’s better”. They constantly negotiate the norms of culture,

“Since I started planning for my actual day, I realized that a lot of things have to be done through constant communications between both your parents and parents-in-law, and there are really no fixed rules as to which should come first or later.” – Rose (forum participant), 15 October 2006, 11:02 am.

“In the past, the Chinese believed that the bride and groom should not meet each other the day before the wedding. However, this taboo is no longer strictly observed (today). The bride and groom will usually meet up on the day before the wedding to finalise their wedding arrangements and collect the bridal gowns, suits and flowers, etc. The taboo is now observed in a modified manner; the bride and groom will not sleep under the same roof the night before the wedding.” - Jina (wedding specialist), on the website *The Chinese-Wedding-Guide*.

“Doesn’t really matter which dialect group they [marriage rituals] belong to. If you want, you simply use.” – Ming, Married for four-and-a-half years.

Today, the bridal couple may embrace a mesh of wedding practices that are to their liking, irrespective of a dialect linkage or adherence to the past. As argued by Lau (1997), what marks the everyday living of Singaporeans is a “patchwork of appropriated cultural traditions. There is a “deliberate re-creation and manipulation of Chinese culture” (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983, quoted in Lau 1997, p. 58). While drawing on archives, the Singaporean Chinese bride and groom negotiate cultural production and their relationships between the past, the present and the future. Therefore, electronic archives should not only be seen as changing the form in which culture is recorded and produced, but rather as transforming the wider conditions in which it is enacted as well (Featherstone 2000). “The electronic archive offers new possibilities for speed, mobility and completeness of access to cultures which have become digitalized, which raise fundamental questions about ownership, intellectual property rights, censorship and democratic access” (ibid, p. 161).

In fact, new electronic archives have the potential to be socially transformative. They transform the relationship between the “private” and the “public”, and mark the coming together of the two spheres. A wedding blog for example comprises information about one’s wedding, such as pre-wedding activities, innermost thoughts, wedding details or facts, videos, photographs, etc. Should such a blog or wedding website be a public document open to for all to read, it unveils a

display of the “private” lives of the couple. The wedding blog of Susan establishes this coming together of the private and the public. Amongst other information, her blog displayed a thorough breakdown of her wedding budget of \$19,739.25 and featured family members (comprising their photographs) and their roles in the wedding – possibly what many would consider as private details about the couple’s wedding and lives. This information would have remained unknown to many if not for the success of the Internet in producing a public sphere. Derrida (1996) argued that the archive is a “place”, with the original archive being at the same time a house. Public records are housed in the private house of the archon (the magistrate). This relationship between public and private becomes inverted as the archive adopts institutional forms of modernity; details about private lives are found in what has come to be public spheres (Bradley 1999). The notion that personal wedding websites or blogs can be simultaneously private and public endorses Meyrowitz’s contention that “the adoption of new media involves a shifting or blurring of the boundaries between private and public spheres” (quoted in Sima and Pugsley, 2010, p. 298).

With the archive taking the form of a virtual site and having the potential to be simultaneously personal and public, the subject of self-censorship sets in – the narrator must negotiate what, how, when, where and how much information to record and display. Being their own archivists, the author or blogger manoeuvres what is to be archived as well whether they are to remain a private memoir or public document. One of my informants, Lyn (married for 6 months), drew a clear line between the two spheres, and restrained from presenting her wedding photographs on the public medium, “I don’t mind letting people see, but not on *Facebook*. As in, you don’t know how friends of friends will see. And it’s a private affair, so those who need to see would have seen it.” On the other hand, a myriad of wedding photographs were

displayed on various social networking websites or wedding blogs I came across. Through blogs and other online publishing platforms, individuals are given a legitimate space to showcase themselves and take on the role of the public personality. The act of archiving – specifically to display material or blog overtly about one’s wedding, to a great extent reinforces the notion of the wedding spectacle and the display of self in contemporary culture.

As in real life face-to-face interactions, an author or blogger negotiates impression by manipulating the portrayal of the wedding performance via the electronic archive. Text or images found in the wedding website or blog tend to depict beauty, romance and fantasy – ideals upheld by the wedding industry and emulated by the couple. Viewers are given a depiction of the preparation behind the construction of the wedding front and the actual performance – a self-presentation strategy that essentially convinces them to view the performance as the author wishes to be viewed⁶⁵. Papacharissi (2002) contended that “online communication provides the perfect context for playing the ‘information game’ in which people exercise maximum control over the information disclosed and stage carefully controlled performances” (quoted in Sima and Pugsley 2010, p. 293). Besides reconstructing the boundaries of the archive, changes in information technologies are reinforcing the display of self and the capacity to negotiate the “perfect self-image”.

Hence, changes in information technologies have extended the notion of archives to enable contemporary individuals to both expediently consult digital wedding archives and to become archivists of their own weddings. Also, archived “private” wedding details are progressively found in what has come to be public

⁶⁵ An analysis of public domain materials showed that a handful of snapshots of exemplary back stage actions that had to do with constructing the wedding front were occasionally uploaded to wedding blogs or social networking websites. These include the bride putting on her make-up, bridesmaids preparing for the gatecrashing, helpers setting up or rehearsing at the venue.

digital domains today. Through Chinese weddings, we see how changes in information technology augment the display of self in contemporary culture and the numerous tensions faced in the lives of Singaporeans, between one's relationship with the past, the present and the future, maintaining private individual life and collective social relationships, managing ideals of revolutionary and traditional, as well as the private and the public.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

Marriage is one of the key points in the ceremonial life of an individual and various rites of marriage are observed to symbolize its creation across cultures. These rites are negotiated to imply different ideas about marriage's meaning and function, as well as to reflect the key cultural values, social needs as well as expectations of a particular social group at a given time. This thesis has shown that beyond just being a family affair complete with customary ceremonial celebrations that symbolize a "bundle of rights" negotiated and conferred upon its adherents, the formation of marriage amongst the Chinese in modern Singapore has come to rest upon ideas such as the public display of the married couple as well as the beginning of a relationship between two individuals. Marriage has moved from being a family oriented to an individual and state oriented institution; ceremonial actions and symbols are manipulated to facilitate the display of the couple. This shift is somewhat bolstered by the contradictory government rhetoric and strategies regarding ideas of marriage and family in post-Colonial Singapore. Individuals are pulled in different ways, vis-à-vis the way they think about their weddings – as a family event, but at the same time as an individual display and spectacle. Accordingly, rituals bolster power relations that underlie normative ideas of gender in relation to the family, yet uphold the development of the individual self.

Wedding consumption is a means of negotiating time and "archives". People employ and choose from a body of knowledge, memory and understanding on social and cultural practices surrounding traditional Chinese weddings. They bargain on the inclusion of traditional customs adhered to in the past and contemporary practices

informed by technological developments, global fashion and tastes in the modern-day Chinese wedding. It is suggested that both collective ritual and time are negotiated; people deliberately integrate what was done in the past in their contemporary weddings to induce and create a sense of “Chinese-ness”. Paying homage to culture and traditions is one of the key concepts of Chinese weddings today. This is in line with Derrida’s (1996) notion that the past influences the rules that are set for the present and future, and the archive has the power on the future-to-come. In this way, marriage rites underpin Chinese culture and link the past, the present and the future.

There is a fundamental change in the way young people think about themselves today in comparison to the earlier generations, and this can be seen through the lens of the wedding preparation, performance, and the “archiving” of the event. As part of the consumer culture of today, individuals are wooed to make a spectacle of themselves in their wedding. We see how the modern wedding is fashioned to be a display of self, emulating the ideals of romanticism, fantasy and individualism. The documentation of weddings has shifted from the photo album (physical archive) to the Internet (digital archive) in light of increasing information technologies, the consumption-oriented and media-saturated culture in contemporary society. Beyond being part of the negotiated project for recording and archiving “memories”, the wedding photograph is itself a display of wedding consumption. Drawing on Couldry (2004), this thesis also contends that many individuals are actively exposing their private lives on the Internet because of the desire to be a public personality. The contemporary Chinese wedding in Singapore is rapidly becoming a technological feat underlining the archival display of the couple as a type of “celebrity”.

Therefore we can see through the way that wedding ceremonies are constructed and negotiated today in Singapore, marriage as an institutions is very different than in early years of the 20th century. Couples, though still concerned with being filial, have many institutions in contemporary society that push them to be concerned more with their individual selves, meaning the Chinese Singaporean couple is not likely to be overly influenced by state rhetoric about declining fertility, nor see the issues of marriage and wedding ceremonies, as representing the same bundle of rights as those of the earlier generations. But probably because the individual is at all times situated within a larger familial, social and cosmic whole (Brindley 2010), my younger informants appear to want to be individuals in pretty much the same ways. They seek for their weddings to facilitate distance from their parents' beliefs, reinforcement of their culture and identity as Chinese, public display, as well as an alignment with global fashion and technological advancements. In this way, beyond being simply a demonstration of their uniqueness vis-à-vis other individuals, the wedding becomes a means to foster a sense of self vis-à-vis the larger familial and social whole.

Through weddings, this thesis has explored the unique negotiation of cultural orientations peculiar to Singapore, and offered glimpses of a simultaneity of the global and the local. It would be worthwhile to further analyse weddings of other ethnic groups within Singapore, or do a comparison with Chinese weddings found in other localities. Instead of focusing on women, it would also be interesting to explore men and their place in weddings.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix 1.1 Profile of Informants

Pseudonym	Years of Marriage	Gender	Dialect	Spouse's dialect	Religion	Spouse's religion	Occupation/ Previous Occupation
Alex	2	Male	Teochew	Hokkien	Christian	Christian	Civil servant
Alice	13	Female	Hokkien	Hokkien	Buddhist	Buddhist	Civil servant
Andy	20	Male	Teochew	Hokkien	Catholic	Catholic	Civil servant (retired)
Carina	3	Female	Cantonese	Teochew	Buddhist	Buddhist	Civil servant
Christine	6 (months)	Female	Hokkien	Free-thinker	Teochew	Buddhist	Teacher
Felicia	6 (months)	Female	Hokkien	Hokkien	Christian	Christian	Teacher
Gillian	3	Female	Hokkien	Cantonese	Free-thinker	Buddhist	Teacher
Gwen	30	Female	Cantonese	Cantonese	Buddhist	Buddhist	Nurse
Hong	1.5	Male	Hokkien	Buddhist	Teochew	Catholic	Director
Huipeng	3	Female	Hokkien	Taoist	Hokkien	Taoist	Civil servant
Huizhen	2	Female	Hokkien	Hokkien	Buddhist	Buddhist	Human Resource executive
Jane	4	Female	Hokkien	Cantonese	Christian	Christian	Civil servant
Janice	8	Female	Hokkien	Hokkien	Buddhist	Buddhist	Civil servant
Jenny	12	Female	Hokkien	Hokkien	Taoist	Free-thinker	Teacher
Jiaqian	2.5	Female	Hokkien	Hokkien	Buddhist	Buddhist	Teacher
Joseph	3	Male	Teochew	Cantonese	Buddhist	Buddhist	Operation manager
Joyce	7	Female	Cantonese	Hokkien	Catholic	Catholic	Teacher
June	23	Female	Hainanese	Hokkien	Free-thinker	Buddhist	Civil servant
Junxiong	6 (months)	Male	Hokkien	Hokkien	Free-thinker	Buddhist	Fund services assistant
Lilian	2.5	Female	Hainanese	Cantonese	Free-thinker	Free-thinker	Civil servant
Ling	6	Female	Teochew	Teochew	Christian	Christian	Civil servant
Lu	42	Female	Hokkien	Hokkien	Taoist	Taoist	Housewife
Lyn	6 (months)	Female	Teochew	Hokkien	Christian	Christian	Civil servant

Pseudonym	Years of Marriage	Gender	Dialect	Spouse's dialect	Religion	Spouse's religion	Occupation/ Previous Occupation
Mabel	7	Female	Shanghainese	Hokkien	Buddhist	Buddhist	Civil servant
May	6 (months)	Female	Hokkien	Hokkien	Buddhist	Free-thinker	Underwriter
Mei	28	Female	Cantonese	Cantonese	Buddhist	Buddhist	Civil servant
Meili	1.5	Female	Teochew	Hokkien	Catholic	Buddhist	Corporate secretarial executive
Ming	4.5	Male	Cantonese	Hokkien	Buddhist	Buddhist	Doctor
Peiyee	32	Female	Hokkien	Hokkien	Taoist	Taoist	Housewife
Rachael	1.5	Female	Hokkien	Teochew	Taoist	Free-thinker	Teacher
Robert	30	Male	Cantonese	Cantonese	Buddhist	Buddhist	Programme operation executive
Serene	1	Female	Hokkien	Teochew	Buddhist	Free-thinker	Civil servant
Zhenling	4	Female	Hokkien	Hokkien	Taoist	Christian	Civil servant
Zoe	4.5	Female	Hokkien	Cantonese	Buddhist	Buddhist	Civil servant

Appendix 1.2 Wedding day programme (banquet)

<u>Groom's House</u>		<u>Bride's House</u>	
5.30am	Wake up	5.30am	Wake up
6.00am	Light up dragon candles by Uncle Lam	6.00am	Light up phoenix candles Hair combing (<i>Shang Tou</i>) ceremony
7.00am	Arrival of 'brothers'	7.00am	Arrival of make-up artist Arrival of photographer Arrival of videographer Arrival of 'sisters'
7.15am	Leave for Bride's house		
7.45am	Reach Bride's house - Ah koo (little uncle) to open car door for groom - Groom to pass <i>ang bao</i> to Ah koo - Gate crashing between the groom, brothers and sisters		
8.45am	Leave for Groom's house		
< 9.20am	Arrive at Groom's house		
10.30am ±	Tea Ceremony		
12.30pm	Bride changes to tea dress for tea ceremony at Bride's house		
12.50pm	Leave for Bride's house		
1.20pm	Arrive at Bride's house		
1.35pm	Tea ceremony		
2.45pm	Helpers to 'disperse' & meet later at Spore Expo Bride and groom to rest and freshen up.		
3.50pm	Leave for Bliss Garden, Singapore Expo		
4.00pm	Arrive at Bliss Garden, Spore Expo Arrival of make-up artist		
5.15pm	Bridal car to fetch bride's parents Helpers to fetch other family members		
5.45pm	Arrival of family members, main coordinator, reception helpers, emcees, photographer, videographer Arrival of Solemnizer		

6.00pm	Groom and Bride welcoming the guests Main coordinator invites guests to be seated for solemnization ceremony
6.15pm	Solemnization ceremony begins - invitation of solemnizer and witnesses - march-in - solemnization ceremony - solemnizer's speech
7.00pm	Cocktail reception begins
Estimated 8.30pm	Emcees' appearance - emcees' introductory speech - 1 st March in - Express Highlights (morning gatecrashing)
8.45pm	Serving of dinner Bride changes to evening gown after second dish Second entry - Cake cutting - 'Champaign' pouring - Cheering (<i>Yum sheng</i>) with brothers, sisters & helpers Photo-taking - Brothers & Helpers act as advance party to arrange the groups Dinner banquet completed

Appendix 1.3 Wedding day programme (church ceremony + banquet)

S/N	Time	Description	Helper/s	Logistics / <u>Instructions</u>
Morning & Pre-Holy Matrimony				
1	6:00am	Alex and Grace to wake-up	-	-
2	7:00am	Arrival of make-up artiste at Grace's home Arrival of photographer	Sandy Stanley	-
3	8:00am	Arrival of Brothers/Sisters at Alex's and Grace's homes	Brothers Team, Sisters Team	-
4	8:45am	Alex and Brothers depart for Grace's home	Brothers Team, Sisters Team	-
5	9:30am	Arrival of Alex's family at 675A	-	-
6	9:30am	Arrival of Buffet breakfast/lunch	Clifton	-
7	10:15am	Tea Ceremony for Alex's family at 675A	Alex's mum	Teapot and teacups
8	12:30pm	Arrival of Alex and Grace at Holiday Inn	-	Boxes for worship, reception, solemnisation and tea ceremony. Alex and Grace's bridal attire, stay over clothes
9	2:00pm	Make-up artiste to arrive	-	Accessories and hair accessories from Bridal Elegance
10	3:15pm	Tea Ceremony for Grace's family	-	Teapot and teacups
11	4:00pm	Touch-up for Grace	Joanne	Grace's kit
Holy Matrimony				
12	2:00pm	Setting up of stage	Zhengpeng, James	Sound system, microphones, keyboard, guitar and bass

S/N	Time	Description	Helper/s	Logistics / Instructions
13	2:00pm	Setting up of multimedia equipment	Heng	Laptop, projectors and screens, slides with procession, songs, powerpoint presentation
14	2:30pm	Rehearsal	Alex, Francis, Annie, Isaiah, Davina, Worship Team	Wedding rings, ring pillow, song sheets, scores
15	3:00pm	Setting up of reception area	Reception Team	Guest lists, guest cards for dinner seating, red packet boxes, signs for different guests, bridal pictures (frame and book), marriage covenant, colored pens
16	3:30pm	Arrival of Guests	Usher Team, Leonard, Clifton	Bulletins
17	4:30pm	Start of Holy Matrimony	Edmund, Charlene, Chin Fai, Pastor Tony	<u>Francis and Annie to cue emcees</u>
18	4:35pm	Wedding Powerpoint Presentation	Heng	-
19	4:40pm	Procession of Grace	Grace and Dad	-
20	4:45pm	Worship	Worship Team, Heng	<u>Alex and Grace to stand</u>
21	5:05pm	Exhortation and Scripture Reading	Chin Fai	<u>Alex and Grace to stand</u>
22	5:25pm	Solemnisation	Pastor Tony, Alex and Grace	Wedding rings
23	5:30pm	Communion and lighting of unity candle	Pastor Tony, Alex and Grace	Elements and wine
24	5:35pm	Signing of Marriage Certificate	Pastor Tony, Alex, Grace, our dads	Pen
25	5:40pm	Prayer and declaration	Pastor Tony	3 candles and candle stands

S/N	Time	Description	Helper/s	Logistics / <u>Instructions</u>
26	5:45pm	Recessional and march-in	Alex and Grace	-
27	5:50pm	Thank you speech	Alex and Grace	-
Wedding Dinner				
28	6:00pm	Start of Cocktail	Reception Team, Heng, Ephraim, Live Band, Edgar	<u>Heng to set up multimedia; Live Band to set up equipment in ballroom; Edgar to do PowerPoint</u>
29	6:30pm	Ballroom Door opens	Usher Team, Live Band, PR Managers	
30	7:30pm (latest)	Emcee to Start Wedding Ceremony	Emcees (W.D)	
31	7:35pm	Wedding PowerPoint Presentation II	Heng	
32	7:40pm	March-in	Alex and Grace, Heng	
33	7:45pm	Cake-cutting ceremony	Alex and Grace	
34	7:50pm	Give Thanks	Pastor Tony / Edmund Wong	
35	8:15pm	Commence photo-taking	Francis, Heng and Zhongren	<u>Request for guests to prepare for photo-taking; Francis to arrange for shifts to allow brothers to have dinner</u>
36	9:00pm	Toasting and thank-you speech	Alex and Grace	
37	9:30pm	End of sixth course	Alex and Grace, and parents	Francis to cue Alex and Grace
38	10:30pm	End	-	-



Just Woman @ AsiaOne

Retro nuptials

Passe? No way! Young couples are embracing all the trappings that come with a traditional Chinese marriage.

Janice Tai
Tue, Jul 29, 2008
The Straits Times

Getting hitched the retro way seems to be the rage among Chinese couples.

They are not doing it in 1960s mini-dresses and psychedelic prints but in elaborate, centuries-old Chinese style.

At least five one-stop shops have opened in recent years to cater to couples who want to observe customary Chinese rituals such as guo da li (gift presentation) and shang tou (hair combing), long considered too archaic and passe by trendy Singaporeans.

Most of their customers are couples in their 20s and 30s, and they do it out of respect for their parents or to reclaim their Chinese heritage.

Accounts manager Jacqueline Sim, 28, did the gift presentation, hair-combing and bed-setting rituals to please her parents when she got married last March.

'Initially, I thought it was a hassle but looking back, I enjoyed the process as I learnt the many dos and don'ts and the subtle differences between the various dialect groups,' she says.

IT sales consultant Maggie Heng, 33, whose tea ceremony is scheduled in September, did the hair-combing and bed-installation rituals because she wanted to embrace her Chinese heritage. 'I don't feel that these are outdated practices. I do it out of respect for the marriage institution.'

And shops are cashing in on the trend by offering wedding paraphernalia required for these rituals.

Ms Joanna Chen, 39, owner of Wedding Cottage at IMM in Jurong, which opened last August, says: 'A lot of people want to do these weddings, but there are not many shops that help couples organise it.'

Business at Fuyuan-The Wedding Shop in New Market Road Food Centre in Chinatown is so good that it expanded into another unit six months after it opened in

December last year.

Similar shops that have been on the scene since the 1950s and 1960s also report better sales.

Minah Departmental in Beauty World Centre in Upper Bukit Timah saw its business jump by 10 per cent after the owner launched a website.

Owner of Cheok Keuw Bridal in Jurong West, Mr Pay Chuan Yew, 50, says selling traditional wedding packages has become an increasingly competitive business today. 'Young people are setting up quite a few shops in Chinatown but I have been able to retain my customer base mostly by referral.'

Young couples, however, are not the only ones snapping up the items. Schools such as Rulang Primary and Punggol Primary have bought them to teach their students about Chinese wedding rituals on Racial Harmony Day.

At Rulang Primary, the teachers even acted out the rituals with the items on stage for the students.

'We were reading about Chinese weddings in the textbook but it wasn't touched on in detail, so we decided to do this,' says Chinese teacher Foo Meng Leng, 55.

Additional reporting by Isabel Ong

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This story was first published in The Sunday Times on Jul 27, 2008.