

Cultural Differences between Chinese and American Weddings

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Abstract. This paper examines the influential factors of the differences between Chinese and American wedding cultures. Two online websites world-wedding-traditions and dazhongdianping because of their detailed records of wedding components are analyzed as evidences of wedding traditions in each country. Under the cultural construction theory, the term “wedding” is reconceptualized and deconstructed into wedding procedures, decorations, wedding dress, banquets, atmosphere, and rituals to interpret the difference between Chinese and American wedding cultures.

Keywords: procedures, decorations, wedding dress, banquets, atmosphere, and rituals.

1. Introduction

Marriage is an important and indispensable part of a person’s social life, dating back to ancient times. It is also a significant and necessary component of various cultures throughout the world. The history and development of a society can be explored through the study of its wedding culture. Nowadays, with the trend of globalization, cross-cultural interaction is inevitable. Wedding culture in one country may change due to the influences of other countries. From both perspectives of cross-culture and cultural multiplicity, one can analyze the possible factors involved in intercultural interaction. Moreover, scholars, students, travelers, and overseas workers can use this cross-cultural knowledge in order to deal with the culture shock and dilemma.

The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast the cultural characteristics of both Chinese and American weddings in order to analyze and discuss the reasons for these differences. The cultural characteristics to be examined include: procedure, decorations, wedding dress, food, atmosphere, and rituals. The research question posed in this paper includes: in what aspects are Chinese and American wedding cultures different?

2. Literature Review

This research has been guided by one of the most important theories of cultural study, cultural construction. This theory states that many influential social and cultural characteristics are not inherent but are constructed by people (Peoples & Bailay, 2011, p, 258). For example, from the perspective of cultural construction, concepts such as a wedding ceremony, style of dress, and banquets do not exist, but things are created by people with the attempt to establish the societies and cultures. Weddings mark a person’s transition from one stage of life to the next while simultaneously redefining one’s social and personal identity. These rituals or rites have been long guided by various cultural values and processes (Rook, 1985), appearing as those comparatively immovable parts of practices intent on preserving and promoting the immutable construction of the sociocultural system (Bell, 1997, p. 211).

According to Brisling (2004), Chinese society tends to be collectivist while Americans lean more towards an individualist culture. Weddings reflect this cultural pattern. According to Brisling (2004, p. 79), which is cited from Kagitcibasi (1990), “The most important distinction between collectivists and individualists is the emphasis placed on the feelings and opinions of group members and the psychological closeness between a person and others.” With regards to Chinese weddings, if one is unable to attend, he or she should give the red packet to another guest to deliver for them. This red packet is a way to apologize and show respect. On the other hand, in America, people can accept or decline an invitation. In China, the act of declining an invitation is impolite and would cause trouble for interpersonal relationships. With regards to wedding banquets held in China; one is formal while the other is traditional. This is done because elders will feel more comfortable attending the formal

banquet. Moreover, the wedding atmosphere is also different. In a collectivist society, people concentrate on helping each other and building a harmonious society. On the contrary, American couples focus on the personal meaning of their wedding. Therefore, their wedding reflects both the bride and groom’s personalities.

2.1 Wedding History

According to ancient Chinese wedding customs, marriage should follow the “three letters” and “six etiquettes” procedure, which are shown in table 1. Even though Chinese weddings are changing with the influence of foreign culture, “six etiquettes”, which is recorded by the Book of Rites, remains the basic procedure of Chinese weddings. There is variation in the “six etiquettes” across geographical locations in China. American weddings are influenced by British culture and Christianity. The Bible (1984) states, “then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.” From this perspective, marriage is created by God and should be in front of God; therefore, weddings should be performed by a pastor.

Table 1. The “three letters” and “six etiquettes” procedure

Three Letter	Six Etiquettes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Request letter 2. Gift letter 3. Wedding letter 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Proposal 2. Matching birth dates 3. Giving initial gifts 4. Giving formal gifts 5. Selecting wedding date 6. Holding the wedding ceremony

2.2 Religious Influence

While many people in China are no longer religious, Taoism, which is an ancient philosophy and belief, remains a strong influence in Chinese traditions and customs. Tao is one yin and one yang. For example, Men are the yang and women are the yin; heaven is the yang and Earth is the yin. Yin and Yang coexist harmoniously. During a Chinese wedding ceremony, bowing to the heavens and Earth is done to show respect. The new couple also bows to parents and to each other according to the harmony of the yin and the yang. The wedding decorations should also obey the law of yin and yang.

In contrast, Christianity is a large influence in American weddings. The ceremony is considered an important way to receive blessings from God. Lestapis (1962) claims that the holy definition of marriage is contained in Genesis. John in the Bible (1984) states that in the beginning was the word, and the word was God. When the bible is translated into Chinese, Taoism is the word and God. Mark chapter ten verse eight of the Bible (1984) explains, “therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate.” With God’s blessing, the marriage will be happy. Both American and Chinese weddings are heavily influenced by religious beliefs.

2.3 Love and Marriage Values

Weddings are also influenced by the values of love and marriage. In China, people view marriage as a way for two families to come together as one. It is also seen to increase the reputation and social position of a family. In feudal society, which dates to pre-1911, a marriage was not based upon love, rather the decision of one’s parents. This decision was based on the honor and social status of a family. Nowadays, people have the right to pursue their own lives and decide what type of wedding they would like to have. However, they also respect their parents’ opinions. In the United States, love is a freedom. People can choose their own preferences whether it be their partner or the planning of the wedding itself. In comparison to Chinese culture, Americans generally have more freedom with regards to choices.

3. Method

The aspect of a wedding culture is a broad and complex conception. In this exploration, the wedding culture is deconstructed into different aspects as wedding procedures, decorations, wedding dress, banquets, atmosphere, and rituals, which are closely related to wedding ceremony. There are two online resources describing the fundamental wedding elements, world-wedding-traditions (<http://www.world-wedding-traditions.net/home/american-wedding>) and dazhongdianping (<http://s.dianping.com/topic/5562266>) providing decisive wedding factors. World-wedding-traditions concluded that American wedding has consisted sections of “before the wedding”, “at the wedding”, “at the wedding reception” and “wedding gifts”. dazhongdianping listed the fundamental factors of Chinese weddings, including “wedding planning”, “before the wedding”, “shopping list”, and “at the wedding”. From the two websites, I conceptualize and deconstruct that the most distinction components of both American and Chinese wedding consist wedding procedure, decoration, dress, banquets atmosphere, and rituals. Then I interpret the basic wedding elements.

4. Data and Interpretation

4.1 Procedures

Based on the data provided in table 2 it can be determined that procedures relating to Chinese weddings are more complex than American.

Table 2. procedures relating to Chinese weddings are more complex than American.

Procedure	China	America
Before the wedding	Plan the wedding Hand out the invitations	Plan the wedding Send the invitations
At the wedding	1.Holding the ceremony 2.The first banquet 3.The second banquet 4.Bow to the Heaven 5.Bow to the earth 6.Thanks to parents 7.Bow to each other	1.Guests go to the wedding place 2.Priest guide vows 4. Wedding choir 3.wedding party
Wedding reception	8.Wedding reception 7.Toast to guests	4.Wedding reception 5.Dancing
Gifts	8.Money and gifts	6.Gifts

A Chinese wedding has two main components including the ceremony and reception. The ceremony consists of three rituals: bowing to the Heaven and the Earth, the parents, and to each other. During the wedding reception, toasts are presented to the guests with wine or tea while the guests give money and gifts to the bride and groom at the reception desk. Trustworthy relatives are asked to keep track of the gifts and money received by writing them down in a specific red notebook. Both Chinese and American young couples send invitations to their guests approximately one to two months before the wedding.

In China, the couple usually gives the invitation card to their guests in person in order to show respect. If they do not have the time to deliver the invitation themselves, they will ask an elder relative or someone with a high reputation to send the invitations. In contrast, Americans generally do not hand out invitations face to face and sometimes they invitations are not even printed. Invitations may be sent through the internet with programs such as Google Docs or Google invitation. This makes responding to invitations very convenient for guests. While in the United States, guests have the choice to accept or decline an invitation; this is not the case in China. Those who are invited are more

inclined to attend the wedding for the purpose of blessing the young couple. If the guest is unable to attend, they ask another guest who is attending to bring a red packet of money as a gift for the new couple. This is done for the guest to give his or her blessings and respect. The social function of this red packet is like the gifts in America.

On the day of the wedding in the United States, guests attend the ceremony in order to witness the exchange of vows guided by a pastor. The ceremony is followed by a reception where the wedding party and guests can mingle with one another. There is generally food and music for everyone to share a meal together and dance. Although gift giving is technically optional, nearly all guests choose to do so. In contrast, the concept of gift giving in China is not as optional. The new couple will later return the money and gifts back if there is a celebration of their relatives' family. Gift giving is seen to show respect and strengthen interpersonal relationships.

4.2 Decorations

Decorations are one of the most indispensable parts of a wedding, regardless of it being in China or America. Before the wedding, Chinese parents will help the bride and groom prepare the wedding supplies and wedding accessories for the wedding day. Some of the various types of wedding decorations are depicted in table 3.

In China nowadays gift red envelopes are necessary for giving money to the best man and the maid of honor. This gesture is performed to give thanks to the best man and the maid of honor for helping with the wedding. In terms of bridal accessories, there are golden earrings, bracelets, and a necklace, which are usually provided by the groom's side. Wedding room decorations may include a red Chinese wedding cushion and a Chinese wedding double happiness. Chinese wedding gift boxes are needed for giving gift favors to all of those invited regardless of whether they attended the wedding or not. Weddings generally take place at a hotel, which means that the hotel is responsible for decorating the wedding hall. Most of the traditional accessories and wedding supplies are red; because red is a typical representation of joy and happiness. Many American couples prefer to decorate or prepare for their wedding without assistance from their parents. Weddings can take place anywhere from a church, courthouse, or outdoor venue. These weddings often have a theme, which could be vineyard, vintage, shabby chic, and various others. This is quite different from China.

In China, wedding venue locations are limited since there must be a wedding dinner following the ceremony. This dinner style is traditional Chinese with a plethora of dishes. The reception venue is decorated with a backdrop, centerpieces, favors and chair covers. There is also a cake topper, popular cupcake jars, measuring spoons, measuring cups, and personalized napkins. The main objective of the various decorations and accessories is to decorate the wedding to be romantic, sweet, and extraordinary. Most of the accessories and wedding decorations are white as opposed to the red color that is often used for Chinese decorations.

Table 3. Some of the various types of wedding decorations

Weddings	China	America
Accessories and Decorations	<p>Red envelope</p> <p>Bridal Accessories: Golden earrings Bracelet Necklace</p> <p>Room Decorations: Wedding red cushion Wedding double-happiness Gift boxes</p> <p>Wedding Hall: Chinese paper lantern</p>	<p>Wedding Themes: Vine yard Vintage Shabby chic</p> <p>Reception/Room Decorations Backdrop Centerpieces Favors Chair covers Cake topper Popular cupcake jars Measuring spoons Measuring cups Personalized napkins</p>

4.3 Wedding Dress

Influenced by western culture and the trend of globalization, most Chinese brides choose white wedding dresses over the traditional Chinese-style dress. During the formal banquet, the bride will dress in a white wedding dress as American brides, because it is fashionable. In the traditional banquet, she will wear a traditional wedding dress, called a qipao. This is done in order to honor the elders in attendance. Chinese brides also wear matching red Chinese wedding shoes and a wedding veil.

In contrast, marriages in the United States are traditionally holy, which is reflected in the bride's attire. The color white represents the idea of holiness; therefore, the bride usually chooses to wear a dress very light in color such as white, off-white, or even silver. In contrast, the traditional Chinese wedding dress and accompanying accessories are red. In Chinese culture, red is a symbol of joy, happiness, and celebration.

Table 4. Differences between Chinese and Western bridal clothing

Country	Wedding dress	Color
China	Traditional wedding dress	Red
	Formal wedding dress	White
America	Formal wedding dress	White, off-white, sliver, other very light colored dress

4.4 Banquets

As mentioned previously, there is both a formal and traditional banquet in China. The formal banquet is very modern and westernized in nature because of the influence of foreign culture. The traditional banquet follows Chinese tradition. Guests come together for a full meal together and drink Chinese white wine, beer, or various other beverages. There are also fruits, nuts, and dessert served. The wedding banquets are also a symbol of giving thanks and appreciation to those who have raised the new couple.

The wedding banquet in America is also known as the wedding reception. The reception may be informal and have a buffet or formal and include a sit-down dinner. The reception gives the new couple an opportunity to mingle with their guests. Along with a full meal, various beverages, snacks, fruits, and cake may also be served. Guests will also toast to the new couple now, which is generally done with champagne. If there is music and dance at the reception, the new couple will perform the first dance and the songs are carefully selected (<http://www.world-wedding-traditions.net/home/american-wedding>).

Table 5. Differences between Chinese and Western wedding banquets

Country		Location	Type of Banquet	Food
China	First banquet	Bride's House	Traditional	Full meal White wine Beer Other drinks Fruits Dessert
	Second banquet	Groom's House	Traditional	
			Formal	
America	Wedding party & reception mingle		Church Or any place	Full meal Champagne Fruits cake

4.5 Atmosphere

The overall theme of a Chinese wedding includes joy, pleasure, and rejoicing. It focuses primarily on the pleasure of two families since it is a time for relatives to get together and celebrate. This is in part due to the collectivist nature of Chinese society. According to Brisling (2004), “people value their group allegiances and are willing to place the goodwill of their group above the pursuit of their own plans (p.77).” Thus, guests should attend to the wedding to celebrate and rejoice with the newlyweds.

In contrast, the atmosphere of an American wedding is romantic and sweet. The couple can choose any place they wish to hold both the wedding ceremony and reception. According to Brisling (2004), people in individualistic societies are rewarded for “doing their own thing, that is making their own plan (p. 76).” This holds true to the weddings in the United States. The wedding is planned according to the preferences of the bride and groom without much input from others.

4.6 Rituals

With regards to rituals, Chinese ceremonies have three. First is bowing to the Heaven and the Earth. This ritual is as indispensable as the exchange of wedding rings and vows in an American wedding. It dates to the ancient times of showing respect to nature and God. Next, the newlywed couple bows to their parents in order to show their thanks and appreciation. Finally, they bow to each other which symbolizes that they will respect and love each other in their future life. Nowadays, motorcades are becoming a popular ritual in China. A motorcade is a line of slowing-moving cars carrying the newlywed couple and some relatives. The motorcade moves along a certain route through the city. Flowers and colorful laces are used to decorate the cars.

In America, exchanging wedding vows is an essential component which symbolizes the love of the newlyweds and promises to each other for their life together in the future. The wedding rings which are also exchanged during the ceremony are a type of covenant that is made in front of God according the Bible. Another classic ritual in American weddings is the bouquet toss. This takes place during the wedding reception. The bride tosses her bouquet over her shoulder to the assembled unmarried women. It is said that the girl who catches the bouquet will be the next to get married. Nowadays, with the trend of globalization and intercultural interaction between America and China, many Chinese brides also choose to toss the bouquet in order to pass her good luck to the next girl.

Table 6. Characteristics and differences of Chinese and Western wedding ceremonies

Country	Rituals
China	Bowing to the Heaven and the Earth: respect to nature and God Bowing to parents: show thanksgiving and appreciation Bowing to each other: respect and love Motorcade: motor show
America	The vows: promise, love, respect The rings: making promises to each other Bouquet toss: passing luck

5. Implications

From the data collected above, six components of weddings were reorganized through comparison between Chinese and American weddings. The included components included: procedure, decorations, wedding dress, banquets, atmosphere, and rituals.

It is imperative for second language teachers to understand and purpose and needs of intercultural education. According to Spradlin (2008), it is important for teachers to know about some of the shared values and traditions. It is also important to know some of the differences (p. 85). From the perspective of second language acquisition, Hernández (2010) states that study abroad programs for

language learning are very important for both language education and learning about culture (p. 606). Thus, from an intercultural perspective, training teachers to be aware of the impact of cultural factors in the classroom can help students adapt to the trend of globalization.

6. Conclusion

There are a wide variety of factors that play a role in the differences between American and Chinese weddings. These factors range from cultural patterns, historical and cultural origins, religious beliefs, and values of love and marriage. These factors are depicted across the various components of weddings including: procedure, decorations, wedding dress, food, atmosphere, and rituals.

Marriage is such an important and indispensable part of one's culture. Through comparing the various wedding customs between Chinese and American weddings, one can better understand these differences and how they are caused by cultural dichotomies. If one can interact with or attend a wedding in one of these two countries, it would be beneficial to understand culture as it pertains to the various components of the wedding.

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