

Vis a Vis

Did You Know ...?

- One-fifth of the World's population, approximately 1.3 billion people, live in China.
- Mandarin, China's official language, is the world's most widely spoken language with 885 million speakers.
- Historically in China, tiny feet were considered beautiful on women. Girls' feet were often bound tightly with bandages to keep them from growing properly. The smallest shoes, called Lotus foot, were only 8 cm long.

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Chinese Weddings: The History Behind Them

China is a fascinating place where east meets west. No place is this more apparent than in Shanghai, a bustling center of commerce in the east. The architecture of Shanghai's waterfront *bund* district is more reminiscent of Chicago's Michigan Avenue than of an oriental city. However, in other areas, Shanghai has preserved the traditional flavor in everything from tea houses to residential buildings. The city streets team with a mixture of bicycles and automobiles from all over the world.

As Shanghai and other cities in China have blended old and new, modern Chinese wedding ceremonies are composed of a beautiful combination of traditional customs and western style. The roots of the ceremony stem from China's 5000-year history which includes more than 2000 years of feudal society. Traditionally, on the wedding day, the bride wore a red dress and covered her face with a red veil. Red symbolizes good luck, happiness, and prosperity. Because most marriages were arranged, the first

time the bride and groom usually met would be on their wedding day, when he came to pick her up. After she arrived at the groom's house, and participated in the wedding ceremony,

she sat in what would be her new bedroom while friends and relatives came to congratulate her new husband and his family, and to celebrate their union. After the guests left, the husband would unveil his new wife and they would begin their life together.

Although some of these traditional elements are still practiced today, Chinese weddings are much more influenced by the west. On the wedding day, the groom decorates the wedding car, picks up the bride from her parents' house and drives her back to his parents' house so that everyone can "welcome the bride." The bride wears a western white bridal gown, and the groom wears a dark suit. After a little rest, they travel together to a reception hall, often located in a hotel.

They stand at the door to receive the guests together. The guests usually bring a cash gift in a small red envelope. People prefer to give money as a wedding gift because it is easy to carry, the new couple can buy anything they like, and the guests can save time choosing gifts.

After the guests have arrived, the wedding ceremony begins. During the ceremony, the new couple exchange wedding rings, a western tradition, and drink some wine or cham-



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pagne while crossing their arms, a traditional custom. When dinner begins, the bride usually changes into a traditional red Chinese wedding dress. The happy couple circulates among the guests, thanking each one for coming, toasting each guest who drinks, and lighting a cigarette for each guest who smokes. At the end of the banquet, the groom's relatives give each guest two small boxes, with candies or chocolates in it, called "happy candy." After dinner, some guests will go to the wedding couple's "new room," which is usually in the same hotel. The "new room" will have been reserved and decorated before the wedding by the bride and groom, and is for the guests and the new couple to play games together and enjoy themselves. In addition, the couple will have also decorated their new house with "double happy" designs—Chinese paper cut-outs made from red paper.

Like China itself, Chinese weddings are a blend of western influence and traditional customs. Many of the characteristics, such as the predominant use of red, are unique to Chinese ceremonies and may be mysterious to Westerners, but if you look deeper, you will find roots in traditional culture that go back for thousands of years.

- Amberly Chirolla and
Ellen Wang for CAI



Suggested Reading: In the Know In China

Since China's emergence on the world scene, it has quickly become a major player in international business. As western persons continue to relocate and travel to China, they are realizing that it represents a vastly different culture. China is a nation in transition; shifting from a traditionalist culture to socialist and finally to one which is beginning to embrace a market economy. Though Chinese culture is becoming more westernized, it is still a unique society with very different customs and ideals.

Jennifer Phillips' book *In the Know in China* discusses the multitude of problems facing individuals working, living, and traveling in China. Broken into nine sections, each with more detailed subsections, this book offers detailed and practical information for individuals working, living, and traveling in China. Phillips' book offers guidance ranging from tips for women working in China to information concerning families moving abroad. Her advice is sensible and useful in daily life as well as regarding the Chinese culture as a whole.

The final chapter offers basic phrases and words in Chinese that would be used on a frequent basis. This is a must read for individuals who plan to live and work in China.

-Amy Nelson



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