

The Significance of Chinese Traditional Wedding Ceremony and Its Value on Modern Society

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(If you can see my PowerPoint slides, then I'll start.)

Venerable Shengmiao and Miss Deng good afternoon. My name is Ye Yushi, today I'd like to share with you the topic of 'The Significance of Traditional Wedding Chinese Ceremony and Its Value on Modern Society'. The presentation will be divided into four parts. Firstly, I will have a brief explanation on wedding ceremony. Secondly, I will share the process of six propriety (六禮) and discuss the significance of them. Then I'll explore its value to modern society. Finally, I'll have a conclusion. Now let's look at the introduction.

1. Introduction

Marriage is a very important and beautiful process in people's life journey, everyone is eager to have a happy family life. However according to National Statistics data, there are more than one hundred thousand divorces in 2018 in England and Wales.¹ Divorce not only means family broken, but also a great harm to both parents and children, which may lead to unrest of society. Therefore, I'd like

¹ BBC News(2020), *More than 100,000 divorces in England and Wales last year*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-54972762>, accessed in 27 January 2021..

to explore the significance of Chinese traditional wedding ceremony so that we may find the way to keep a happy family.

First of all, what is Chinese traditional wedding ceremony? According to *The Book of Rites* (禮記), ‘The propriety of marriage unites two families with different surnames, to commemorate the ancestors with respects and offerings, and produce offspring to carry on the family name and the teachings of the forefathers. Therefore, a noble person would value marriage as an important event.’ (昏禮者，將合二姓之好，上以事宗廟，而下以繼後世也，故君子重之。) ² This shows that marriage is not only a matter of two people, but also a combination of two families. Everyone can trace the history of their ancestors back to thousands of years ago, then passing on good family virtue and tradition from generation to generation.

2. The significance of six propriety

Then let’s look at the six propriety of the traditional wedding ceremony, including *nacai*, *wenming*, *naji*, *nazheng*, *qingqi*, *qinying* (納采、問名、納吉、納徵、請期、親迎).

2.1 The process before *qinying* (親迎)

The first procedure is *nacai* (納采), proposing a marriage which is ordered by both parents. If the groom’s parents knowing that the bride are virtuous and kind, considering that it is suitable for each other to make a marriage. Then they will ask the willing of the bride’s parents through matchmaker with respect. After the parents

² Comp. by Wei zheng 魏徵 et al. Trans. By Chung Hua Cultural Education Centre (M) Bhd, *The Governing Principles of Ancient China (Based on 360 passages excerpted from the original compilation of Qunshu Zhiyao)*, (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 2012), p.277.

of bride agree to it, they would start the propriety of *nacai*. During the propriety of *nacai*, the bride's father would put on his ceremonial clothes and go to the door to meet the messenger of the groom. Before messengers walk on the step of the ancestral temple, both will ask the other to go first. The humility to each other can express their sincerity.

Then messenger will send the wild goose as a gift to the bride's father. Why send the wild goose? Because wild geese are migratory birds, they will fly to the south for winter, never break promises. It means that the couple will keep their promise. Besides, the wild geese are birds following *yang* (陽), fly to the place facing the sun and spring, which means that wife follow her husband. In addition, if one of the wild geese dies early, the one left will never seek a new partner, which is also a good symbol of the couple's loyalty.

The second procedure is *wenming* (問名), the groom's father will entrust the messenger to the bride's home to ask bride's name (infant name)³ and her birth date. The third procedure is *naji* (納吉), The groom's family will take the name and birth date of groom and bride to the ancestral temple, then ask the wishes of their ancestors. If divination is auspicious, they will tell the bride's family through messenger. In fact, the six propriety are all carried out in the bride's ancestral temple, in other words, in the witness of the ancestors. We can feel the respect of the ancients to ancestors, for they will not act on their own.

The fourth procedure is *nazheng* (納徵), namely betrothal today, after *nazheng* the marriage relationship between the two families has been determined. But why should send the betrothal gifts? Is it for obtaining wealth? Actually, there's a certain amount

³ By Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji jiji* 禮記集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), vol.58, p.1417.

of betrothal gifts in *the Rites of Zhou* (周禮). After *nazheng* the groom's parents will also think that, 'it is our family's fortune to marry the good bride'. Because the purpose of propriety is modest and respect, and the way of betrothal gifts is to express the sincerity and grateful.

The fifth procedure is *qingqi* (請期), which is to select an auspicious wedding date. The groom's parents will entrust the messenger to ask the parents of bride's choice with great respect, because they do not want to be self-assertion. Then the bride's parents will also decline politely and ask the groom's parent to decide it. Therefore, the courtesy between two families not only allowed the wedding to run smoothly, but also showed mutual respect and humility.

2.2 The process of *qinying* (親迎)

The last procedure is *qinying*, which is the highlight of the whole wedding ceremony, groom will go to bride's home to escort her to his home. At first, before the groom goes out, his father will give him a toast. In the general occasion, it is the young toasts to the elder. But this day father will toast to son, and son does not have to return. The father says, 'Son, go and marry your bride, from this day onwards teach her how to behave respectfully, and you should also behave in a reasonable way.' The groom says, 'Father, I'm afraid I can't do it well, but I will try. I will never forget what you taught me.' (父醮子，命之曰：「往迎尔相，承我宗事。勸帅以敬，先妣之嗣。若则有常。」子曰：「诺。唯恐弗堪，不敢忘命。」)⁴Through the ceremony, we can feel the father's expectations and the son's respect for his father.

⁴ Annotation by Zheng xuan 鄭玄, Commentary by Jia Gongyan 賈公彥, collated by shisanjing zhushu zhengli weiyuanhui 十三經注疏整理委員會, *Yili zhushu* 儀禮注疏 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshu, 2000), vol.6, p.118-119..

After groom arrives at bride's home and presents the wild goose, the bride's parents will personally hand over their daughter to the groom, which represents that they have entrusted their daughter's lifelong happiness to the groom. Before leaving, parents will repeatedly tell the bride. Father says, 'you must be prudent and respect, be filial to your parent-in-law without against their wishes'. Besides, mother will tie a silk kerchief to her and says, 'you must be diligent and frugal, remember to take good care of your family.' Her concubine-mother will send her a pouch, so that she would think of parents' teachings when she saw it. (父送女，命之曰：「戒之敬之，夙夜毋違命！」母施衿結帨，曰：「勉之敬之，夙夜無違宮事！」庶母及門內，施鞶，申之以父母之命，命之曰：「敬恭聽，宗爾父母之言。夙夜無愆，視諸衿鞶！」)⁵Behind that is parents' love and concern to the bride.

The groom will be considerate to help the bride get on the carriage, and drive for her. After three circuits of the wheel, he handed over the driving to others. Then he will wait outside the door, wait for the bride to accompany her into home. (御婦車，而婿授綏，御輪三周。先俟於門外，婦至，婿揖婦以入。) Because on this day the bride will leave her parents, brothers, and sisters, she could be worried. What the groom do can let her feel at ease. Moreover, the groom starts to drive the carriage means that he begins to carry on the responsibility of the family.

Later, groom and bride share a bowl of food, and each drinks a rice wine with one half gourd (同牢而食，合卺而飲)⁶. After drinking, the two halves of gourd will be united a complete one, showing that they are one family from now on. The gourd is

⁵ Annotation by Zheng xuan 鄭玄, Commentary by Jia Gongyan 賈公彥, collated by shisanjing zhushu zhengli weiyuanhui 十三經注疏整理委員會, *Yili zhushu* 儀禮注疏 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshu, 2000), vol.6, p.119-120.

⁶ Annotation by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Commentary by Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 2019), vol.68, p.1414.

bitter, while the wine is sweet, indicating that they should share joys and sorrows in the future. Moreover, the next day there are other ceremonies, including bride meet the groom's parent, family identity change and meet the ancestors of groom in ancestral temple three month later. The marriage was not officially consummated until it was approved by parents and ancestors.

3. The value of traditional wedding ceremony to modern society

What does Chinese traditional wedding ceremony enlighten us? Some people may say that today is different from the past, our dietary habit, lifestyle, and living environment have changed a lot from ancient times. How can we live completely according to ancient rituals? There are also those who may say that today is an era of freedom and democracy. We are no longer 'making match by parents' order and on matchmaker's word' (父母之命，媒妁之言), we are free to choose our own life partners. I think that these ideas may be reasonable. The form of propriety can change with our actual living environment, but the spirit and significance of wedding ceremony is the true wisdom that could beyond time and space and bring happiness to people in different times and area.

Because the pace of life in modern society is fast, but it is easy to lose our heart in busy. Everyone longs for family love but why do so many people still end up getting divorced? There are many reasons behind it, from my point of view I think there are two reasons for it. Firstly, it is generally believed that marriage is a matter of two people. So, they could be together impulsively, and break up by emotions. Secondly, although there is love between them, but if without respect for each other, love cannot last long.

3.1 A rational and prudent attitude to marriage

In ancient China, although marriages were ordered by parents, most couples could live a happy family life together. The reason is that their choice for marriage is not emotional, but a very rational life choice. Young people tend to be impulsive, but parents' choice is different. Because they are older than their children, they have experience, and they all want their children to own the happiness of life.

According to official data, there are 9,471,000 (nine million four hundred seventy-one thousand) couples got married in China, while 4,154,000 (four million one hundred fifty-four thousand) couples registered for divorce in 2019.⁷ Although we are free to choose marriage today, sometimes our choices are not reasonable enough. Someone maybe think that 'as long as he shows kindness to me, it will be all right'. But if they don't know his character, whether he is filial to his parents, and what his attitude to others, there will be problem. Therefore, marriage is not just a matter of two people, behind it is the blessing of parents, family responsibility, as well as the expectations of the society. Indeed, the attitude to marriage need to be rational and prudent.

3.2 Respect comes before love

Kong yingda (孔穎達) says, 'when people hold a wedding ceremony, they must be respect and prudent. Respecting the propriety comes before couple's love. If not, couples will gradually break up and not close to each other.' (敬慎重正者，言行昏禮之時，必須恭敬謹慎，尊重正禮，而後男女相親。若不敬慎重正，則夫婦久

⁷ Zhongguo shehui bao 中國社會報(2020), *Minzheng bu juxing 2020nian diyi jidulixing xinwen fabuhui* 民政部舉行 2020 年第一季度例行新聞發佈會, <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/xw/mtbd/202001/20200100023083.shtml>, accessed in 29 January 2021..

必離異，不相親也。)⁸ Nowadays people often think love is important, but if there is no respect for each other, the relationship cannot maintain for long. Therefore, the humility and respect for each other is the core of wedding ceremony. With them, the morality between the couple can be achieved.

According to Zhejiang Provincial High People's Court, in 2018 there are one third (34.2 percent) of the divorce cases which is because trifles matters.⁹ In fact, there will exist different opinion in daily life, after all they have different habits and growing backgrounds. How can there are no conflicts in family life? But the key is to think for each other. From 'I like everything of him' to 'I only see the shortcomings of him', there is less respect and compassion but more self-feeling. If husband can realise wife's hard, wife can understand husband's work, care for each other, and respect each other, the family can be happy and harmonious.

4. Conclusion

Wedding ceremony is the root of all ceremony in ancient China. Behind it is the prudent for marriage. The significance of Chinese traditional wedding is to inherit ancestral virtue and be filial to both parents, as well as to educate children and continue good family morality.

Nowadays, many countries are facing the crisis of high divorce rate and family breakdown. There are two possible reasons, firstly, young people tend to be hasty and impulsive when making choice of marriage. Secondly, although there is love, but without respect for each other, love cannot last long. The wisdom and prudence

⁸ Annotation by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Commentary by Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 2019), vol.68, p.1416.

⁹ Tengxun xinwen guyu gongzushi 騰訊新聞穀雨工作室(2020), *2020 zuixin lihun ditu: nali de fuqi lihunlv zuigao guyu shuju* 2020 最新離婚地圖：哪裡的夫妻離婚率最高？穀雨數據, <https://new.qq.com/omn/20201224/20201224A065MF00.html>, accessed in 30 January 2021.

in Chinese traditional wedding ceremony, as well as the humility and mutual respect in the propriety, may bring enlightenment to the dilemma of modern life. In this way, the home will always be a warm, grateful, and caring place, the family will also be happy and complete for long.

This is all for my presentation. Any feedback and suggestion would be appreciated. Thank you very much!

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