

Marriage Customs of Dong Minority in Tongdao Dong Autonomous County of Hunan Province

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Abstract. This article is written based on the selected translation of the Chinese folklore monograph *Grand View of Dong Customs*. It gives a vivid presentation to the unique Dong marriage customs and analyzes the historical changes occurring to those marriage customs as the local society develops.

Introduction

In Tongdao Dong Autonomous County of Hunan Province, local Dong Minority is an ethnic group that attaches great importance to etiquettes and taboos concerning marriage. Their marriage ceremonies are usually held in a grand and formal way, strictly following several basic procedures like “fetching the bride and bridesmaids home”, “entering the gate of the bridegroom’s home”, “holding wedding banquets” and “escorting the bride back to her own parents’ home”. In all the marriage activities, they act according to customs. Their marriage customs are said to be unique with local flavor. Among them, the most representative ones include “robbing for the bride and bridesmaids”, “teasing the bride”, “the bridegroom sisters’ proposing toasts and the bride’s serving Youcha”, “non-intermarriage within the same clan”, and “not dwelling long at husband’s home after marriage”.

Robbing for the Bride and Bridesmaids

To pursue a lively and impressive marriage, some bridegrooms intentionally adopt the way of “robbing” to fetch the bride and bridesmaids home. Accompanied by several young lads, the bridegroom usually approaches the bride’s home to rob for the bride at dusk. To oppose the “robbing” folk, the bride’s family will organize a defending team ahead of time. The team is often composed of a dozen odd people, including peer-ladies, elder sisters, and old aunts. All members dress themselves in the same way with the bride. With weapons of bamboo chips or brooms on hand, they lurk around the bride’s wooden house ready to clash with the “robbing” folk. If unluckily the defending team is disarmed by the young robbing folk, the members will try to hide themselves from one place to another to tease those young guys. Looking for the bride everywhere, the guys will be smeared with black stuff for grabbing the wrong bride. Sometimes, elder sisters or old aunts are mistakenly robbed for as brides. The whole scene is filled with fun and amusement.

Once the real bride is snatched, the bridegroom will rush towards the exit with the bride on his back. If the exit is blocked, some of his accompanying folks will climb down from nearby galleries or windows to help him flee while others shoulder the responsibility of grabbing the bridesmaids. Those bride-fetching lads, under the frequent flaps of bamboo chips or brooms, do their best to support the escape of the bridegroom, bride and bridesmaids. While the onlookers from the same village with the bride’s family will all join in the effort of grabbing the bride back home. At that time, the other folk hidden on the midway will pop up to prevent the villagers from blocking the escape. Being pushed and pulled by the both sides, the bride and bridesmaid are robbed away in the end.

Teasing the Bride

This custom is mainly popular in western Tongdao Dong Autonomous County. Usually it is the bridegroom's aunts and sisters-in-law in the same village that start the teasing. At the wedding banquet, they sing paeans to praise the bride and her bridesmaids. Afterwards, they cheer the bride and bridesmaids up to sing various forms of paeans back. The sequence of the songs should be: "paeans to the banquet", "paeans to the house", "paeans to the village", "paeans to the senior", and finally "paeans to aunts and sisters". For self-abasement, the aunts and sisters may sing humble songs about the defects of their own or their families on purpose. In reply, the bride and bridesmaids try all means to flatter them by singing high praise of those aunts and sisters. Such antiphonal singing doesn't end until the kids of the village come to beg for sweets and candies. After the kids' teasing comes the youth who set fire cracks to tease the bride for Youcha. Then they sit around the fire pit, begging the bridesmaids to light cigarettes for them. The young guys and the bridesmaids will also sing antiphonal songs of "lighting cigarettes" and "drinking tea". The whole scene is really amusing and warm.



Figure 1. Youcha—photo from <http://image.so.com/>

Youcha, a kind of Dong tea, is a delicious thick soup in Dong diet. Dong people usually offer Youcha as a special treatment to welcome their guests. The ingredients of Youcha include green tea, puffed rice, crisp soybeans, fried peanuts, pig offal, and green onions etc.

The Bridegroom Sisters' Proposing Toasts and the Bride's Serving Youcha

In some southern areas of Dong people, the first toast is proposed by the bridegroom's sisters instead of the new couple at the wedding banquet to express the whole family's respect to the guests. The guests being toasted should accept the wine glasses politely and say a few auspicious words. After drinking up the wine, they are expected to return the glasses gracefully with some change to the bridegroom's sisters as luck money.

When guests are cheery with wine, the bride will serve a bowl of Youcha to them for esteem one by one accompanied by her bridesmaid holding the tray. Before taking over the bowl, guests are required to sing or say a few propitious words. Upon finishing the tea, they are assumed to drop some change to the bowl. Returning an empty bowl is not customary among Dong people.

Non-Intermarriage within the Same Clan

Dong minority have two different clan systems, respectively patrilineal clan with the same family name, and combined clan with different family names. The former is a large clan formed via patrilineal relationship. The members of the same patrilineal clan worship the same ancestor. They are forbidden to marry each other no matter where they have migrated or how many generations they have multiplied. Combined clan with different family names is formed of several small clans.

Restricted by the slow growth in population, some clans originally only have a few households. Under such circumstances, those small clans are short of hands when they have the need of holding weddings or funerals. To solve the difficulties, they form a big clan with each other. For example, such a combined clan exists in Qiaozhai Village of Tongdao Dong Autonomous County. Within that clan, members have different surnames, such as Yang, Su, Zhu, and Wu. Whenever a household of the clan has weddings or funerals, other members will offer a helping hand like blood brothers. As time goes on, those combined clans become as closely tied as patrilineal clans. Intermarriage among members of the same combined clan is thus banned too though they have different family names.

Not Dwelling Long at Husband's Home after Marriage

Since ancient times, Dong people have followed their own special marriage customs of “new couples don't consummate upon marriage”, “the bride doesn't dwell long at her husband's home in the first three to five years after marriage”. If a bride settles down at her husband's home soon after marriage, she will be scorned by others. Within the first three to five years after marriage when the bride mostly stays at her own parents' home, both she and her husband are allowed to participate in dating activities of singing antiphonal songs at night.

However, there still should be much contact between the two families of the bride and bridegroom within that special period. In the first lunar month of the second year after marriage, the bridegroom's family is expected to dispatch several women or girls to send the bride's family some cotton for spinning. After the bride's family finishes the spinning of threads with the cotton, they will invite several other women neighbors to deliver the cotton yarn back to the bridegroom's family. Whenever important festivals arrive, the bridegroom's family should present gifts to the bride's family for respect. For example, on the second or third day of each lunar New Year, the bridegroom should pay a visit to his parents-in-law and bring them some gifts with several of his uncles and brothers. Meanwhile, the bridegroom's family will also request a woman and a little girl to pick up the bride. The bride, however, usually declines their request on purpose or even hides herself to show the shyness a bride is expected to bear. She won't go with them unless the woman has made repetitive persuasion. Sometimes, the bride nods only when the little girl begins to cry. If the bride is picked up too easily, bystanders will make unfavorable comments on her. The first time when the new couple consummates at the bridegroom's home, the bride will go back to her own parents' home after staying there for two or three days at the most. After that, her mother-in-law will plead her to come back and help with the work during busy seasons and important activities like weddings or funerals. During those first three to five years after marriage, the bride keeps moving from one family to the other until she gets pregnant. When she has been pregnant for three months, her parents will invite several women of their clan to escort her to her husband's home together with her daily spinning tools.

Conclusion

With the improvement of living conditions and the frequent communication with the outside world, Dong minority's marriage in Tongdao Dong Autonomous County is no longer restricted to alliance within near-blood families or nearby villages. They have begun to form marriages with people of different ethnic groups from other parts of the country or even foreign countries. In consequence, their marriage customs have undergone tremendous changes. In general, the custom shows the trend of acculturation with Han, modernization and even westernization. In detail, some marriage customs have been abandoned because of the changes in the practical conditions of their life. For example, the phenomenon of “early marriage” of Dong girls is vanishing, so the marriage custom of “not dwelling long at husband's home after marriage” has been almost abolished. In other words, shortly after marriage, the Dong bride will immediately settle down at her husband's home. There are also some marriage customs that have been simplified to adapt to the accelerated pace of modern life. For example, the traditional custom of “robbing for the bride and bridesmaids” is still retained in some remote Dong villages. However, the procedures are made less complex. If you

want to experience those traditional marriage customs of full flavor, you need to wait for special festivals or cultural tourism promotions.

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