

The Past and Present: The Process of a Formal Dong Marriage in Tongdao Dong Autonomous County*

Guihua He

Foreign Languages School

Huaihua University

Huaihua, China

Abstract—This paper is written partially based on the selected translation of the Chinese folklore monograph *Grand View of Dong Customs*. The body of the paper presents the four procedures of a traditional formal Dong marriage in Tongdao Dong Autonomous County of Hunan Province: "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 the end, the author analyzes the historical changes occurring to the Dong traditional marriage process and their possible causes.

Keywords—Dong minority; marriage process; historical changes; causes

I. INTRODUCTION

Marriage is an important window for people to understand the culture and social relationship of a certain ethnic group. The Dong minority living in Tongdao Dong Autonomous County of Hunan Province, China has long been renowned as a nation that pursues romance and pays attention to etiquettes. They regard marriage as a major event of critical importance in their life. For them, the marriage process must be formal and solemn. A formal traditional Dong marriage usually includes four procedures: "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". However, with the development of local economy and the frequent exchanges with outside areas, the traditional marriage customs of Dong minority have undergone tremendous changes. This paper will carry out a comparative analysis of the past and present Dong marriage process as an example to explore the existing status of the Dong traditional marriage customs under the modern context.

II. FETCHING THE BRIDE AND BRIDESMAIDS HOME

A few days before the bridegroom goes to the bride's home to fetch the bride and bridesmaids, the bridegroom would have his large family members gathered and ask them to help with wedding preparations. For example, they will be assigned the task of sending invitation cards which ask

relatives and friends concerned to take part in the wedding on the planned day. The guests who come to celebrate the wedding will present gifts to the host family. Most commonly, the gifts are food stuffs like wine, fish, duck, goose and rice. "Fish" is frequently sent because the Chinese words which mean "fish" (鱼) and "ampleness" (余) have the same pronunciation. "Chicken" can't be used as a gift for it is believed to be a foraging poultry which implies a negative connotation that it might spoil a well-matched marriage. In addition, people there have the custom of sending "pairs of red mirror screens" as gifts, which symbolizes "like-minded pairs, happy union". Moreover, the mirror screens ("Fig. 1") sent by the bride's uncles must be hung on the left side of the host house to face the ancestral gods to show respect for the relatives of the bride.



Fig. 1. Pairs of red mirror screens — photo by Su Yiyong.

On the day before the exact fetching takes place, the bridegroom family needs to send an envoy to the bride's home beforehand. The envoy will take some gifts there in representative of the bridegroom family. The gifts are food stuffs like wine, pork meat, geese or ducks. Moreover, the envoy should be extremely well dressed all over, seeming to compete with the beautiful bride. Approaching the bride's home, the envoy will set firecrackers to announce the good news of marriage. That night, the bride's family will serve the envoy folk with a grand feast. The envoy folk are usually hospitably treated, accompanied by the representative relatives from the bride's family. The accompanying relatives themselves will also bring some gifts to the host family, such as a dish and a pot of wine.

On the exact day of fetching, the groom heads for the bride's home with his pals when deep dark falls. Usually the

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groom takes along a lantern (originally "a torch", later "a lantern", and sometimes "a flashlight" nowadays) and his companions help carry some food for night snacks. As they approach the bride's home, they will hide the snacks in case others find them. The bride, on the other hand, will invite several of her intimate female friends to jointly wait for the groom folk at home. After the groom folk step in, the bride maids will repeatedly urge the visitors to take out food for snacks. The groom folk, however, keep delaying on various excuses. Then both sides start a verbal duel. The duel will undergo quite a few rounds to have mutual fun. The groom folk will ask his followers to serve night snacks to the bride folk when the time for departure draws near. After the night snacks, they will depart for the groom's home together.

Fetching the bride and bridesmaids home usually takes place at the time period of "Yin"¹ ("Fig. 2") for two reasons. For one thing, the Chinese words "寅" and "人" are pronounced the same way in the Dong dialect. For another, they choose the time period to avoid encountering unlucky people and things on the way. While the bride-fetching procedure is under way, Dong people consider it a taboo to meet another bride-fetching folk. If that really happens, the two folks need to give way to each other and exchange flower belts or handkerchiefs. In their opinion, everything will be smooth after marriage if they do exchange those stuffs.



Fig. 2. Time period of "Yin" — photo from <https://baike.so.com/>.

III. ENTERING THE GATE OF THE BRIDEGROOM'S HOME

On the exact day of fetching the bride, the bridegroom's mother will put a bundle of grains outside the gate of her home in advance. As the bride enters the gate, she will ask her future daughter-in-law to carry the bundle inside for a bundle of grains symbolizes "a rich harvest and an auspicious future". After the bride walks inside, the bundle

¹ According to ancient Chinese division of time, a day can be separated into twelve time periods. Every time period equals two hours of nowadays. It is said that the ancient Chinese named the time periods in accordance with the haunting time of the twelve animals of birth years. The time period "Yin" refers to the transition period from deep night to early morning, 3 a.m. to 5 a.m. During this period, tiger is the most active and ferocious in the animal world.

will be stapled into the central pillar of the hall with a bamboo nail. This denotes their sincere wish for the new couple's marital stability. Then the bride approaches the fire pit and sits on the side where women usually cook. This is a token that the bride has settled down and joined in the family. After that, she starts to make fire and distribute popcorns to guests. "Distributing popcorns" in Dong culture signifies that the new couple will give birth to as many babies as they want and the whole family will flourish. After drinking tea with guests, the bride is then guided to shell grain for rice in a small workshop of the bridegroom's home at deep night. When neighbors nearby hear the shelling sound, they get to know that a certain guy in their village is marrying a wife. Early next morning, all the girls and women in the village will come to the bridegroom's home for a close look at the bride. In return, the bride entertains them with a thick tea soup called Youcha for courtesy. ("Fig. 3")



Fig. 3. Youcha — photo from WeChat Group "The Charm of Tongdao Dong Autonomous County".

IV. HOLDING WEDDING BANQUETS

For Dong people, wedding banquets can be of different scales. Before the founding of the People's Republic of China, some wealthy and influential families killed pigs and slaughtered cattle for grand wedding banquets; ordinary families only prepared plain banquets of a small scale for their relatives and friends; poor families seldom held banquets. Instead, they merely offered a casual meal to the bride's closest relatives, and served their neighbors with Youcha.

The form of Dong people's wedding banquets also varies from region to region. In southern Tongdao County, the groom family offers a wedding banquet to their relatives and friends the next day the bride enters their home. In western Tongdao County, the situation is more complex. Generally, people there follow the same etiquette as southern people. That is to say, the groom family only provides one wedding banquet to the guests. However, there are also occasions when wedding banquets go consecutively for two or three days. If the banquets last for two days, the groom's family hosts a long-table feast on the first night and then the whole clan of the groom concertedly prepares lunch for the guests on the second day. If the banquets continue for three days,

the first supper and the third lunch are served by the groom's families. At intervals, the individual families of the groom's clan take turns to offer meals to guests.

V. ESCORTING THE BRIDE BACK TO HER OWN PARENT'S HOME

After the wedding banquet, the groom will send several of his clan brothers to escort the bride back to her own parent's home (the number of the escorts must be odd). To let those escorts and the clan members of their own acquaint each other as relatives, the bride's family will hold a special feast customarily known as "The bride's returning-home-feast".

To smoothly send the bride back home, the escorts must overcome three barriers. The first barrier is "being blocked at the entrance to the bride's village". To hinder the visitors from entering the village too easily, the bride's family will ask some lassies to shut the gate to the village. Moreover, they will set various obstacles along the lanes the visitors must pass, such as spinning wheels, looms, and plows. The escorts are pushed to sing praise songs so as to pass the obstacles. Those who don't sing are made to drink wine as a punishment. The second barrier is "being stopped at the gate to the bride's home". At the gate to their home, the bride family will lay a large square table with nine bowls of wine before the escorts arrive. The visitors are then requested to sing wine songs to avoid being teased or punished. The third barrier is "being stripped". When the bride is escorted back home, her family will hold a chicken dinner to entertain the bridesmaids. Although the dinner has actually been prepared beforehand, the bridesmaids will deliberately bully those escorting lads for fun by asking them to buy chicken for the dinner from nearby villages. Their overcoats are taken off as mortgages, which won't be returned until they bring back chickens.

As the bride's returning-home-feast ends, the escorts will leave while the bride usually stays at her own parent's home. She might continue living with her parents for three or five years. As a common practice, she doesn't stay at her husband's home for a long time until she gets pregnant.

VI. CONCLUSION

With the improvement of living conditions and frequent exchanges with the outside world, the Dong minority living in Tongdao Dong Autonomous County are no longer confined to marriage with the same ethnic group or neighboring village alliances. They have begun to marry people of different races from other parts of China and even abroad. Therefore, their marriage customs are inevitably affected by the shock of outside culture. Specifically, the following changes have taken place in their marriage process:

First, marriage gifts are of a more diverse variety and higher value. In tradition, marriage gifts of Dong minority are often limited to pigs, fish, rice wine, glutinous rice cakes, Dong clothing, silver ornaments, fruit, and Dong silk embroidery etc. Today, the variety of gifts is more diverse, including not only food and clothing, but also high-end

furniture, modern appliances, cash and even cars. In particular, the bride's dowry is increasing in value. As far as they could afford, bridal families will offer high-level dowries to show the family's wealth and power. They believe that high-level dowries will improve their daughter's financial status in her husband's family. Moreover, Dong brides traditionally don't take along a lot of dowries to the bridegrooms' home when they are fetched. They only carry several pieces of casual clothes for changing. Formal dowries are usually presented by the bride's parents on the birth-celebrating ceremony taken place three to seven days after the bride gives birth to the first baby. This custom is no more in vogue now for the sake of convenience. Formal dowry is often sent while the bridegroom fetches the bride since Dong marriages are seldom formed between nearby Dong villages at present.

Second, the standard of wedding banquets keeps constantly improving while the procedures of those banquets are continuously simplified. In the past, the wedding banquet of Dong minority was basically held at home. The banquet scale might differ substantially: those poor families only offered Youcha to entertain their neighbors and a simple meal to serve their utmost relatives like uncles; those well-off families, however, might kill pigs and cattle to prepare grand banquets for their guests. What's more, such banquets usually lasted for two or three days. The bride's family, the groom's family and the groom's clan family members took turns to offer banquets to the guests. Nowadays, the popularity of taking turns to entertain guests with banquets is decreasing because the marriage of Dong minority is no longer restricted to the same ethnic group or nearby regions. Moreover, Dong minority tend to hold wedding banquets directly in hotels to show their wealth.

Third, the custom of "not dwelling long at husband's home after marriage" has almost been abolished. In the past, the bride would continue living with her own parents for three or five years after being escorted back home. She wouldn't dwell long at her husband's home until she got pregnant. Nowadays, the Dong bride will immediately settle down at her husband's home upon marriage because brides are mostly above marriage age. "Early marriage" is rarely seen in current Tongdao Dong Autonomous County.

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