



Female Consciousness in Wedding Photos: A Study on Western Wedding Dress in the Modern Chinese Contexts on Social Platform

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Abstract. A wedding dress, as a gown worn by females during a wedding ceremony, has an important symbolic meaning. Traditionally, a wedding dress has a close connection with a woman's marriage and her role as a "housewife", which stands for a milestone in her life. Multiple social ideologies are added to the dress, making it a garment of femininity. Thus, the wedding dress serves as an ideal observation object to study female consciousness and corresponding social norms. Tracing back history, the spread of Western wedding dress in the Republic of China has been a symbol of female liberation. This paper focuses on comparing Chinese wedding dress in two periods: the republican period and modern China, to explore the development of female consciousness. By conducting an observation on Xiaohongshu, which is a social platform widely used by the contemporary Chinese young generation, the research has found significant progress in wedding dresses and wedding photos. The wedding clothing and shooting styles grow to contain more diversity and personality, which reveals the development of Chinese women in the 21st century. Overwhelming social judgment, women's self-expression has become the prior determinant of wedding dresses and wedding photos.

Keywords: Wedding dress · Female consciousness · Social media

1 Introduction

The clothing choice is under the influence of occasion, situation, and the identity of wearers, through which it functions as a medium that conveys multiple visual information. The information may include one's taste, status, social relationships, and so on. A wedding dress is a garment to be worn by the bride at a wedding ceremony, it thus plays a significant role in expressing people's understanding of marriage as well as women's role in society.

Marriage is closely connected to a great majority of the population, which is shown by the booming wedding market in recent years. According to the research published in 2007, from 2002 to 2007 about 9 million Chinese couples got married [1]. In 2021, "the total number of marriageable people aged 20–40 in China is about 447 million" [2].

As an important source of wedding ceremony sense, wedding dress also occupies a huge market share. In 2019, the size of the Chinese wedding dress market has reached 200 billion yuan, which proves the important position of the wedding dress in the wedding market [3].

The mainstream wedding dress in the modern era originated in Western countries. In Western history, wedding dress, as well as marriage overall, use to be a form of control and oppression upon women. The colour and design of wedding dresses used to be influenced by religion and alliance, which expresses the expectation towards women from a patriarchal society.

2 Literature Review

Several historical facts may prove that a wedding dress represents unequal gender relationships in Western history. For example, as Edwina Ehrman points out in her book *The Wedding Dress*, the preference for white use in a wedding dress has a connection with Christianity, which is one of the most influential religions around the world. Christians consider white as a colour of purity, and by developing the custom of wearing a white wedding dress, it expresses the expectation towards a bride: be innocent and virgin [4]. Another historical fact is that marriage used to be a transaction, where women's value is greatly depreciated. One typical example is the marriage market in Babylonia, which is introduced by Costas Meghir in *The Marriage Market in Babylonia* according to Herodotus Histories. In the article, Meghir writes "in every village once a year all the girls of marriageable age used to be collected together in one place, while the men stood round them in a circle; an auctioneer then called each one in turn to stand up and offered her for sale [5]". In such a wedding bid, women's value is limited to their appearance, for pretty girls can be sold for more money while the ugly ones get the least sum. Women are considered to be commodities without feeling and human nature, while the wedding dress is its packing.

However, the application of the western wedding dress in Chinese society has given the garment a new meaning. In *A Research on the Development and Innovation of the Wedding gown of Chinese Han Female*, the author Ya Deng introduced the historical development of the traditional Chinese wedding dress. The history of traditional Chinese wedding dresses can date back to 221 BC when the first dynasty in China was set up, and unifying the clothing customs has been considered to be an essential way to promote the ruling of the government. The design and use of traditional Chinese dress is largely influenced by Confucianism, which is the most influential domination doctrine in ancient China. Thus, while traditional Chinese wedding dress contains good meanings, such as harmony and etiquette, it also reveals problems and outdated thoughts in ancient Chinese society, such as the inequality between different genders and classes [6].

During the Republic of China (1912–1949), the use of Western wedding dress increased dramatically, and gradually took place of the traditional Chinese wedding dress later. The popularization of the Western wedding was promoted by the government, which tried to borrow beneficial Western culture to eliminate the negative atmosphere and traditions in Chinese society. In *Characteristics analysis of western wedding dresses of women in Shanghai during the Republic of China*, the authors point out that

the government published the policy of clothing to promote the application of Western clothing in 1912. In 1927, the political figure Meiling Song took the lead by holding a Western wedding ceremony [7]. Xiaolan Zhu also mentions in his article *See Western learning spreads eastward in Photographs* that some social movements, such as the New Culture Movement starting from 1915, are important driving forces [8]. Therefore, the Western wedding dress was widely accepted and considered as a representation of freedom, liberation, democracy, as well as equality in the Republic of China, especially in more developed imported city like Shanghai.

A good way to explore the development track of the Western wedding dress is by looking through wedding photos at the time. Due to the New Culture as well as the development of economy and industry, photo studios flourished in the Republic of China. As Yi Wang writes in *A Study on the Female Images Photo Studio During the Republic of China Period*, the newspaper *Shenbao* recorded 252 photo studios at the time, and wedding photos are a popular topic [9].

One of the most famous studios is Wang Kai Photo Studio located in Shanghai. According to *The Past and Present of Shanghai Wang Kai Photo Studio* written by Xin Fan, the studio lived on shooting wedding photos during the 1930s to 1940s and began to encourage Western wedding dress before the garment gained popularity [10].

In the previous studies, while many scholars have conducted research on wedding photos in the Republic of China, few compare them with wedding photos in modern China. With the social, economical, and technological development, people's taste of wedding dress, as well as the way they take picture of it and display it has a prominent change.

Compared with that in the Republic of China, shooting wedding photos in the photo studio is still appreciated in the modern era, but ways to display the photos have developed. In addition to collecting photos at home and cabinet, people send them on social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu. The boom of the We-media in the twenty-first century gives easy access to share wedding photos and enables people to easily convey their values in the photos.

The target of this study is to help readers better understand the value attached to a wedding dress in modern China. To conduct the survey, the research paper will look into wedding photos shown on the social platform Xiaohongshu. Xiaohongshu is a lifestyle platform published in 2013, where people can share all parts of their daily life, such as outfits, makeup, food, and entertainment. The research chooses to base on Xiaohongshu because it is a platform widely enjoyed by the Chinese young generation. In 2019, Xiaohongshu has gained 300 million users, while 70% of them are born after 1990. This paper assumes research on Xiaohongshu can effectively reflect living attitudes and social psychology in the modern era. By comparing wedding photos taken in the recent ten years with that in the republican period, the study explores how modern wedding photos express female consciousness and female social identification.

3 Discussion

By comparing wedding photos in two periods, four features of modern wedding photos stand out. First, modern wedding dress has more abundant colour selections. Most wedding dresses in the republican period are white, which continues the western tradition.

While the colour of wedding dresses in modern times is much more abundant. In addition to traditional white, colours such as black, yellow, blue, and pink are also widely enjoyed. Moreover, some wedding dresses break the tradition of using a single colour and instead use multiple colours on one dress.

Second, wedding dresses in the modern era embody more abundant fashion and styles. In the republican period, the styles of wedding dress is quite limited, which usually consists of a long wedding gown and a blusher wedding veil. In the recent wedding photos, however, wedding dresses enjoy much more diversity and flexibility. Some people add garments to the traditional wedding dress, for example, modern elements like sunglasses, bandanas, and cowboy coats. While some maintain the wedding veil but replace standard wedding gowns with more diverse clothing, such as knee-length skirts and overalls. In some cases, wedding dresses even “disappear”. Both the bride and the bridegroom wear unisex clothing, for instance, pantsuits as well as T-shirts and trousers, where gender differences are not emphasized.

Third, modern wedding photos show great diversity in the field of composition and occasion. Photographers in the Republic of China prefer to take front photos, in which the couple stood or sat side by side, looking directly at the camera. While in modern wedding photos, photo composition has become much more diverse. Multiple shooting angles are included, such as side photos as well as from above and from behind.

The more diverse photo composition also creates a higher request for the shooting occasion. In the republican period, most wedding photos were shot indoors, with a single colour blank background or backgrounds with simple patterns. While in modern times, wedding photos can be taken both indoors and outdoors. In the indoor shooting, the occasion is carefully decorated with various props, through which the specific style and atmosphere expected by the consumers is established. The outdoor shooting involves more possibilities, in which the occasion can be the beach, forest, lawn, street view in the city, and so on. Additionally, the rise of travel photography in recent years extends the potential of wedding photos. The most significant difference between a traveling wedding photo and the traditional one is that the former has a unique memory behind it, which makes both the photo and the experience hard to replicate.

Fourth, there appears more interaction and forms of interaction within the modern wedding photos. As mentioned above, there is a limitation on posture choices in the republican wedding photos. The couples stood or sat, giving their attention to the camera, which means there is little interaction between the bride and the bridegroom. With the development of composition and occasion, wedding photos in modern times also allow more interaction between the couples. Eye contact and body contact are used to emphasize the relationship between the bride and the bridegroom. By communicating with the photographed people, the photographer designs personalized postures that best describe the ideal relationship between the couple.

In some cases, a wedding photo only has one photographed object. Some unmarried people may take single-person wedding photos. Reasons to take single-person wedding photos are diverse, for example, it can be an expectation for a romantic relationship, disappointment in the past marriage, as well as independence and self-love. Thus, compared with couple wedding photos, emotions contained in a single-person wedding photo can be more complicated. A good way to thoroughly express the emotion is by creating

an interaction between the photographed person and the environment. By having the object interact with environmental elements, such as light and shadow, it can be told that modern wedding photos have a large development within the field of color, style, composition, and occasion, as well as interaction compared with that in the republican period. Therefore, the study suggests that modern wedding photos reflect the strengthening of female consciousness through three features, which are diversification, personalization, and life-oriented.

3.1 Diversification as a Redefinition of Social Aesthetics

From the research, it can be seen that there is not a clear mainstream wedding photo and multiple fashions and styles are enjoyed, which reveals that the social aesthetics have become more inclusive. The standard of beauty is no longer fixed, thus people with different tastes and styles can be admired. The diversification of aesthetics reduces judgment and interference from the outside world, encouraging women to pursue beauty in their definition. Meanwhile, aesthetic diversity means one's natural appearance is not the only determinant of beauty. Multiple garments and styles rising in the modern era are used to emphasize one's strengths as well as embellish the weakness, enabling everyone to have a unique charm.

3.2 Personalization as an Emphasize on Self-expression

There are more unique elements in the wedding photos that show the personality of the owners. The focus of wedding photos has shifted from catering to social scrutiny to self-expression. While in the past, wedding photos contain a religious meaning and a sense of ritual, which is a common sense shared by the whole community, wedding photos today are much more personal. Some couples may choose a topic to relate to their personal experience and a smaller group. For example, couples a shared interest in games and movies may select game and movie scenes to take a photograph.

3.3 Life-Oriented as a Symbol of Female Liberation

The dressing code in a wedding and the shooting style of a wedding photo reflect the shared value of a society or community. In the wedding photos, the formal dress style once reflected the significance of the wedding in women's life. Through the sense of ritual attached to the dress, people shaped marriage as a milestone-like existence. However, in the modern era, the boundary between a wedding photo and general art portraits is blurred. To some extent, the special meaning of a wedding photo decreases, and it becomes more daily. The phenomenon demonstrates a change in understanding of marriage—for women, marriage is no longer a subversion or reshaping of their social positioning, but a continuation and enrichment of their original social life. In other words, marriage is a part of one's lifelong development. It is people who give value to marriage, instead of marriage giving value to a person.

However, modern wedding photos also have some defects. Although modern wedding photos show great diversity, it is still based on templates provided by the photography company. In other words, the photographer is the designer of the photos, so there is

still a gap between photographed people fully expressing themselves. Another problem is the generation gap, by conducting an observation on Xiaohongshu, it can be noticed that many young couples voice the concern of being opposed by the elders is clearer.

4 Conclusion

According to the research, female consciousness, which is shown by the preferred wedding dresses at the time, has developed in the past 100 years. From the republican period to modern China, both wedding dresses and wedding photos have huge development. From the standard black and white wedding photos with single wedding dresses to diverse wedding clothing photographed from different angles on different occasions, the shift not only shows the technical and economic development within China, but the social psychology towards gender and gender relationship. Most of the time, a wedding dress emblems marriage and a turning point between the original family and the newly formed family, which reveals a society's thoughts towards interpersonal relationships. The diversity and personality in wedding dresses embody more flexibility between multiple relationships: male and female, husband and wife, as well as family and individual. Compared with the early patriarchal society where males took the dominance, modern Chinese society embodies more negotiation between different social identities and gender roles, which enables women to speak and to be heard to a certain degree. The act of emphasizing personality in a wedding photo reflects that women are treated and respected as an individual, instead of accessories for men. Although the perspective of this paper is unique, it also truly shows the awakening of Chinese women's consciousness.

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