

February/March 2015

A few days ago, in the lovely nearby city of Chizhou, I attended the wedding of one of my former students. Marriage traditions in China vary depending on what part of the country you're in, and whether you're in an urban or rural area. The latter tend to be more traditional, while the former include some Western elements. However, there seem to be three aspects of the wedding protocol common to all.



In the photo: Posing with Sabrina, my former student, and Calvin at the wedding banquet. Red plays an integral part in Chinese wedding festivities.

The first is obtaining the marriage license or certificate. Most weddings in China do not take place in a church and the certificate is often obtained months in advance. Although the happy couple are legally married, they are not really considered so in the eyes of their family and friends until the wedding banquet is held. Nor do they live together.

The second aspect of marriage protocol involves having the wedding photos taken. Weddings are big business here and wedding photo shops (hun sha ying lou) are everywhere. Unlike in the West, where the photos are normally taken on the day of the wedding, the couples here arrange several photo shoots in advance and make a DVD. Both are shown at the wedding banquet.

The third and most salient aspect of the wedding is organizing the banquet. Choosing the date is a delicate matter and is often left in the hands of a well trusted fortune teller. The date is selected according to the Chinese lunar calendar: the numbers of the months and the days must be lucky ones, and the moon and the stars have to be properly aligned. Although weddings are held throughout the year on any day, they generally occur during major Chinese holidays, such as the Spring Festival (Chunjie).

Once the date has been selected, preparations can begin in earnest. Red wedding invitations are delivered by hand—the colour red plays an integral part in Chinese wedding festivities. Replies are not expected, and the dress code for guests is very casual. Furthermore, there is no specific seating arrangement as in the West. Foreign guests, who are treated royally, are likely to be seated near the head table or with some other special guests. There is a copious amount of delicious food (mostly meat), and red wine and baiju (a very strong traditional spirit often made from sorghum or wheat) are the beverages of choice. Unfortunately for non-smokers, packages of cigarettes are freely handed out. But so are small lovingly packaged boxes of candies. Money, and not gifts, is given to the happy couple in a red envelope, either before or at the wedding banquet.

The banquet itself usually begins at a predetermined auspicious hour, such as 6:58pm or 7:08pm., eight being a number meaning good fortune in China. There are very few speeches compared with the western counterpart, but usually an MC will introduce the speakers and make funny remarks about the newlyweds. Towards the end of the dinner the couple (the bride now sporting a traditional Chinese gown called a qi pao) visit each table and make a toast with the guests. After the toast it's OK to leave, and most guests do. Thus the banquet is all but over by 8:30pm. In some ways this seems a bit anticlimactic compared to western celebrations, which sometimes go on to the wee hours of the morning. So I have upon occasion invited some of the guests to join me for a nightcap and a chat about who might be next to tie the knot, or just to shoot the breeze. It's a nice way to wrap up such a special evening.

Cheers, Stephen