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Six Rites of Allied Harmony: Changes in Ancient Chinese Wedding Ceremonies under the Influence of Confucianism

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Abstract: Ancient Chinese wedding ceremonies served as the solemn rituals for witnessing and establishing marriage, primarily aimed at forging kinship ties between two families and fulfilling the obligations of ancestral worship and lineage continuation. Within the Confucian tradition, the family and the state have always been interconnected, and ancient Chinese weddings, dating back to the Zhou dynasty, have maintained the fundamental order of both the family and society. This article primarily explores the influence of Confucianism on ancient Chinese wedding rituals and customs, as well as the historical evolution of wedding ceremonies throughout different dynasties. According to Confucian principles, the main procedures of the wedding ceremony included six rituals: “Nacai” (proposal ceremony), “Wenming” (name inquiry), “Naji” (betrothal gift ceremony), “Nazheng” (gifts for the selection of the auspicious day), “Qingqi” (asking for a wedding date), and “Qinying” (wedding procession). These six rituals were collectively known as the “Six Rites”. This study found that, during the Qin and Han dynasties and the Tang and Song dynasties, there were two important stages of reform of wedding ceremonies under the influence of Confucianism. The “Six Rites” were streamlined and merged into the “Three Rites”, gradually becoming more secular. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the interaction between Confucianism and the wedding ceremony weakened until the Republic of China period, when traditional constraints were broken. It is evident that the “Six Rites” have continued to serve as the template of traditional Chinese weddings and have been the important basis for subsequent wedding customs.



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Keywords: traditional Chinese weddings; Confucianism; marriage customs culture; ritual evolution; etiquette design; wedding phenomena

1. Introduction

The wedding ceremony is a socially recognized ritual that marks the establishment of a marital bond between a man and a woman. It encompasses the entire process from proposal to engagement to the actual wedding ceremony itself (Ma 2014). Etiquette and ceremonial rites are integral aspects of Chinese life (Peng et al. 2022). In ancient China, the wedding ceremony was also referred to as the “hun li (昏禮)” and was one of the “jia (嘉)” ceremonies (Hu 2019). It served as a means of assisting a newlywed couple in transitioning into their new roles and identities, representing the beginning of a new family. Particularly for women, marriage is the means for obtaining a permanent place to belong and become a part of the husband’s family. Ancient Chinese wedding ceremonies, rooted in Confucianism, held strong ethical and social significance under the guidance of Confucian ideology. These rituals played a crucial role in educating society and regulating behavior. Confucianism emphasized the responsibilities and obligations of parents, asserting that couples should strive together to procreate and pass down their values, thereby perpetuating their lineage and family ideals. Therefore, despite variations across different historical periods, ancient Chinese wedding ceremonies consistently emphasized the stability of marriage and the importance of the family, advocating for mutual respect, care, and support between spouses.

Many religions have specific wedding rituals that are established based on religious beliefs and doctrines, and China is no exception. Some scholars consider Confucianism to be a religion, while others argue that it is better classified as a philosophy, moral system, or cultural tradition (Cahill 2001). However, it is evident that Confucianism emphasizes personal cultivation, ethical morality, family values, and social order, and its teachings and values hold significant religious and spiritual significance for many Chinese individuals. Confucianism plays a central role in shaping the ideological framework. It emphasizes that human actions should align with “virtue” and establishes a set of norms based on moral requirements known as “rituals”. The formulation, regulation, and value concepts of ancient Chinese weddings, in particular, stemmed from Confucianism, and their development occurred within the core framework of Confucianism while being influenced by societal, cultural, artistic, and economic changes of the time. The earliest records of Chinese weddings can be found in the Confucian classic, *Yi Li · Shi Hun Li* 儀禮·士昏禮, from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770–221 BCE), which outlines the main procedures of the wedding ceremony as the “Six Rites”. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to primarily explore the developmental trends of the Six Rites in later periods, aiming to investigate the interaction between Confucian ideology and ancient Chinese wedding ceremonies and their influence.

Currently, research on ancient Chinese traditional wedding ceremonies can be classified into three main categories. The first category focuses on exploring wedding customs and rituals from the standpoint of pre-Qin ceremonial systems and Confucian classical texts. Yang Zhigang conducted a comprehensive study on the various forms of wedding ceremonies within the overall framework of Chinese ritual systems (Yang 2001). Chang Jincang systematically categorized ancient Chinese discussions on rituals, thereby elucidating the distinct boundaries of wedding ceremonies and customs within the scholarly domain (Chang 2005). Chen Shuguo and Lan Jiayun provide a detailed examination of wedding rituals from ancient times to the pre-Qin period (771–221 BCE) based on the *Zhou Yi* 周易, with particular reference to polygamous marriages with concubines following the marriage (Chen and Lan 2007). Xu Wei and Xu Huimin focused their research on the wedding ceremonies depicted in the Book of Rites, providing insights into the metaphysical foundations, value, significance, and potential limitations of ancient Chinese wedding rituals (Xu and Xu 2016). Meng Qingnan summarized the early Confucian perspectives on the significance of wedding ceremonies, highlighting the themes of harmonious bonding and mutual respect (Meng 2017).

The second category involves a systematic study of wedding ceremonies as part of marriage from the perspective of ancient Chinese marital history. Some comprehensive works in this category include Chen Guyuan’s extensive discussion on the historical development of Chinese marriage, specifically addressing the characteristics of wedding ceremonies in the section on marriage methods (Chen 1987). Wang Binling analyzed various wedding rituals and marital customs of different ethnic groups in China from the perspective of marital history (Wang 2013). Chen Peng focused on the process of marriage formation, emphasizing different forms of marriage that existed in Chinese history and organizing historical materials related to wedding rituals and customs (Chen 2005). Furthermore, there are specialized studies on wedding ceremonies and customs during specific dynasties. For instance, Peng Liyun explored the wedding system and distinctive features of the Song Dynasty (960–1279) (Peng 1988), while Xie Baofu conducted a detailed investigation into wedding rituals and phenomena during the Northern Dynasties (386–589) (Xie 1998). Qu Ming’an used the study of wedding ceremonies in a particular dynasty to explore the main characteristics of royal weddings throughout history. By focusing on the discourse and ritual elements in the process of courtship and marriage in the scholar–bureaucrat’s wedding during the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE), Qu Ming’an proposed the significant viewpoint that ancient Chinese royal weddings formed a symbol system with a binary structure (Qu 2020).

The third category involves interdisciplinary research on wedding ceremonies from a socio-cultural perspective. Chen Xiaofang used the *Annals of Spring and Autumn* 春秋左傳 as a blueprint and proposed the theory of “Three Rituals for Spring and Autumn Weddings” (Chen 2000). Lu Shiqiu, from a comparative religious studies perspective, vividly presented the prevalent folk wedding and funeral customs in China through a combination of text and illustrations (Lu 2009). Zheng Huisheng attempted to discuss the relationship between the status of women in pre-Qin society and marriage from a female perspective and explored research in the field of cultural linguistics, revealing the implicit relationship between ancient Chinese kinship terms and wedding systems (Zheng 1988). Ji Guoxiu linked wedding ceremonies with social structures and the evolution of the ceremony with social change, analyzing the changes in Chinese village weddings within the context of social networks (Ji 2005). Additionally, numerous scholars have compared and summarized the cultural customs of wedding ceremonies in different regions or among different ethnic groups in China. For example, Xu Yuan and others discovered wedding custom activities in the Hanzhong region (Xu et al. 2014), and Wan Delengzhi and Zheng Dui explored the changes in traditional wedding customs of the Tibetan ethnic group (Wan and Zheng 2020). These studies reflect the influence and development of traditional wedding ceremonies and concepts in various regions, broadening the research perspective on ancient Chinese wedding ceremonies.

As an interdisciplinary research topic, ancient Chinese weddings have been widely studied in terms of their constituent factors and influences. Currently, there are abundant research results on ancient weddings influenced by Confucianism, which provide important insights into the inheritance and transformation of wedding rituals. However, most of them focus on macro-level discussions of the history of marriage or specific studies of a single dynasty or region. There is a lack of research on how the Six Rites in the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE) impacted and permeated later wedding ceremonies, as well as the evolution of wedding rituals throughout different dynasties under the influence of Confucianism.

Therefore, this study primarily centers on the Confucian wedding rituals of the Chinese elite, exploring the successive wedding rituals formulated by rulers and the phenomenon of wedding activities dominated by the scholarly class as the entry point. The focus is on the examination of the ritual processes and customs of ancient weddings, as well as the contextual design and underlying conceptual ideas. This leads to the following research questions: How did the Six Rites, established based on Confucian ideology, change, adapt, and transform over time? How did the designers of wedding ceremonies and political-economic factors influence the dimensions of the ritual performances? Is there any interaction and influence between the practices of wedding ceremonies and Confucian norms and values? In the scope of research on ancient Chinese weddings, the state rituals and folk customs are inseparable. Under the guidance of ritual systems as ideological guidelines, the differences between eras also contribute to the distinctive folk performances of wedding ceremonies. In response to the research question, we analyzed the wedding rituals and customs of major dynasties. Two main historical lines were summarized. Firstly, the ancient Chinese wedding rituals were developed and evolved from the foundational Six Rites proposed by Confucianism, represented by Confucius during the pre-Qin period. Secondly, the wedding customs in ancient China experienced a transition from Confucianism-dominated Han culture to a fusion of diverse cultures and ideologies. Ultimately, it critically advocated the pre-Qin Confucian ideology represented by Confucius to guide and explore the past and future of Chinese Confucian weddings.

2. Methodology

This study employs historical research and literature analysis methods. A comprehensive review and analysis of existing literature shows that the formulation, norms, and value systems of ancient Chinese weddings are rooted in Confucian wedding rituals. However, previous research has predominantly focused on specific dynasties or regional wedding

customs, lacking an exploration from the perspective of historical evolution and succession regarding the development of ancient Chinese wedding ceremonies under the influence of Confucian thought. Furthermore, there is a notable absence of holistic comparative analyses across different centuries. Historical research is a methodology that employs historical records to study past events in chronological order. In China, these transitions are marked by dynastic changes, defining distinct periods of social life. Consequently, this study explores the evolution of ancient Chinese wedding ceremonies across various historical periods, focusing on key dynasties that underwent significant transformations and developments for in-depth investigation.

This study collected primary source materials and used a systematic literature research method to analyze and explore the ancient Chinese wedding ceremony. The study used the Confucian classic text “*Yi Li·Shi Hun Li* 儀禮·士昏禮” as a model to investigate the six rites in ancient China. This text provides a comprehensive record of the wedding ceremonies during the Zhou Dynasty and is one of the earliest and most complete classical works documenting these rituals. It has also served as an authoritative reference for subsequent studies of wedding rituals. Therefore, the third section of this study thoroughly examined the core rituals, processes, and concepts of Confucian wedding ceremonies during the Zhou Dynasty.

Based on this foundation, the study delved into two specific aspects of ancient Chinese wedding ceremonies: the official and the folk traditions. On the official level, historical accounts and records of royal and aristocratic weddings were mainly derived from official ritual classics. In the Song Dynasty, private literary works such as “*Jia Li* 家禮” provided further insights into ceremonial customs. This study collected relevant literary materials spanning from the Han Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty and, in combination with ancient court paintings, explored significant changes in wedding rituals during different dynasties. A comparative analysis was conducted, comparing them with the ‘Six Rites’ documented in the Confucian classic “*Yi Li·Shi Hun Li* 儀禮·士昏禮”, examining their characteristics, evolution, and connection with Confucian cultural thought. On the folk level, customs and traditions of ancient Chinese weddings gradually formed in local communities, often without official historical records. The data in this research area were mainly sourced from historical records, local gazetteers, novels, poetry, and Dunhuang manuscripts, as well as visual evidence from murals and artifacts. Descriptions of wedding scenes were commonly found in everyday life records, oral histories, folk songs, and documents describing geographical landscapes. These materials effectively depicted wedding scenes from various dynasties. Therefore, representative texts related to Confucian cultural thought and enduring wedding customs were selected as focal points. They were systematically summarized and organized, effectively reconstructing the visual representations of wedding customs and activities from different dynasties. In summary, the comprehensive application of these two methods enables a thorough and holistic study of the historical, cultural, and religious background of ancient Chinese weddings under the influence of Confucian thought. This approach also sheds light on the status and impact of weddings in traditional Chinese society.

Nevertheless, there are certain limitations in this study. Firstly, Confucianism itself is not inherently religious, yet it holds significant religious and cultural value in ancient Chinese society. There is an interrelation between ancient Chinese weddings and religious studies, potentially influenced by various religious wedding rituals. While this paper discusses the introduction of Christian weddings during the Republican era, leading to the emergence of modern civil weddings, it lacks a more detailed examination of these connections. Our study aims to reveal the historical evolution of wedding ceremonies, but further exploration is needed to unravel the intricate relationship between Confucianism, religion, and ancient Chinese wedding rituals.

Secondly, the study of Confucian wedding rituals demands more refined methodologies when considering the complexity and changes spanning different historical periods. By employing phenomenological analysis, more intricate and subtle questions can

be posed. Given the profound and extensive nature of ancient Chinese wedding customs, it is challenging to provide a comprehensive and objective assessment with only a few centuries of research. This paper represents an initial exploration, opening the door for further research into Confucian wedding rituals, which still provides ample opportunities for scholarly exploration.

3. The Foundation of Human Relationships: The Origin of the Ancient Chinese Wedding and the Six Rites System Established by Confucianism

3.1. Tracing the Origins of Ancient Chinese Wedding Ceremonies

Weddings are based on marriage, which emerged earlier than weddings. The earliest historical form of marriage was primitive clan-mixed marriage, followed by forms of marriage based on blood groups and extramarital relationships, resulting in a clan marriage system where two clans intermarried in a state of cohabitation without forming a household. During the mid to late Neolithic period, the clan group marriage system was gradually replaced by paired marriage¹ (Wang 1962). In *The Book of Rites·Li Yun* 禮記·禮運, it is recorded that “the desire of men and women for food and sex is one of the great desires of humanity” (Zheng 2021). This indicates that gender relations and diet are equally important human physiological needs. At this time, marriage was increasingly valued, and people tended to stay with their spouses. With the transition from matrilineal to patrilineal society, the concept of marriage changed from the natural cohabitation of men and women to a means of ensuring the continuation of family heirs (Chang 2005). Wedding ceremonies emerged during the late stage of the paired marriage system, as marital parties sought divine blessings through specific rituals to establish the marital relationship and form a family. Particularly in ancient China, despite the practice of polygamy, a family could have only one legal wife who was married through proper marriage rituals. Simultaneously, social constructivism argues that rituals are socially constructed and maintained (Liu 2015). As a ritual, weddings shape the symbols, norms, and expectations of marriage, contributing to the construction and maintenance of the institution of marriage and family values in society.

Religions typically have a set of norms and values that encompass perceptions and regulations regarding gender roles, gender identity, and gender behavior. As a religious ceremony, weddings often reflect and emphasize the expectations and norms associated with gender roles within a specific religion. Moreover, the status of Confucianism in social ideology became increasingly prominent, and it propagated moral principles by compiling the three Confucian classics². These works, in turn, emphasize the dual significance of marriage: on the one hand, it carries the meaning of human relationships, as the wedding ceremony is closely related to the emergence of the concept of yin and yang. It was not until the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) that the Confucian system of ritual studies centered on the *Book of Zhou Rites* 周禮 officially proposed that men and women represent the yin and yang levels of society. In *The Book of Rites* 禮記, marriage is referred to as the “beginning of all ages” and the “foundation of ritual” (Sun 2004), emphasizing that couples are the foundation of human relationships and that other relationships such as those between a ruler and subject and between father and son are also established through the wedding ceremony. On the other hand, the wedding ceremony also carries significant implications for stabilizing the family, the state, and the world. Confucius advocated the poem “*Guan Ju*” (關雎), drawing a parallel between the osprey seizing a fish and human marriage conducted through rituals and music (Liu 2013). The virtuous gentleman uses qin and se to approach the lady, employing bells to create joyful music, symbolizing a love marked by emotional restraint, prudence, and the pursuit of marital harmony. This poem exemplifies Confucian aesthetics and moral standards, serving as a model for a harmonious and stable marriage. *The Book of Rites* 禮記 states that the marriage of the emperor and empress can serve as a model for the entire world and that the harmony between the external governance by men and the internal management by women is a sign of an era of great virtue and governance (Peng 2004). The *Shiji* 史記 also notes the belief that the success or failure

of an ancient emperor's rule was often related to the virtuousness of his spouse (Sima 1982). In summary, in a feudal society, under the system of ritual propriety, individuals appeared in social life as members of a family with a collective personality. The development and evolution of the wedding ceremony were influenced by the progress of marriage and the ideology of ritual propriety, with its essence lying in continuous iteration and renewal to ensure family harmony and clan advancement.

The *Yi Li Shi Hun Li* 儀禮·士昏禮 is the earliest complete record of weddings in China, in which one can gain a clear understanding of the six ceremonial procedures and key information of the wedding ceremony. It provides detailed regulations on the timing, location, and participants of wedding ceremonies during the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE). Specifically, the term “hun” (昏) in the wedding ceremony refers to dusk, signifying the gradual transition between Yin and Yang. As a result, the wedding ceremony is held during twilight, symbolizing the harmonious convergence of the cosmos. While some scholars support that dusk was considered an auspicious time in ancient times (Anonymous 1996). In religious wedding ceremonies, there often exists a division of labor and roles based on gender. For example, men may be assigned specific ritual responsibilities, while women may be expected to assume other roles. Confucian weddings are no exception. In the Six Rites, besides the bride, groom, and their respective families, there are other significant individuals involved, including the master of ceremonies (主人), the ushers (擯者) responsible for receiving guests, the liturgist (贊者) who performs the ritual, the female teacher (女師) in charge of educating noblewomen, the matchmaker or messenger, and various attendants, relatives, and those accompanying the bride. Apart from the female teacher and matchmaker, all others are male, indicating the dominance of men in these roles. According to Ernst Cassirer (2006), humans live within a symbolic universe and a network of symbols. Marriage symbols reflect the degree of regulation and behavioral patterns of romantic relationships between men and women in social and cultural structures. They express experiential knowledge, social customs, rational logic, and the contrast with the natural world. Hence, one of the most significant symbolic representations within the Six Rites is the wild goose, as live geese are presented during various stages of the ceremony. The ancients believed that the migration of geese between the north and south represents the harmonization of yin and yang. Therefore, the use of geese in marriage rituals symbolizes the harmony between men and women, as well as their unwavering loyalty to the institution of marriage.

3.2. The Core of Wedding Ceremonies: The “Six Rites”

The specific process of the Six Rites includes six ceremonial procedures, which, together with post-marital rites, constitute the basic structure of the wedding ceremony (Figure 1).

- Nacai (納采)³: In ancient times, betrothal negotiations had to be handed over through matchmakers and envoys. The process began with the man's family inviting a matchmaker to the woman's house to propose marriage. If the proposal were accepted, the man's family would send a messenger with a gift of geese to the woman's family to express their intentions. If the woman's family accepted the gifts, it indicated their agreement to the marriage proposal.
- Wenming (問名): In ancient times, following the requirements of ritual propriety, after Nacai (納采), in order to facilitate the man's divination of wedding matters, it was necessary to inquire about the woman's name and birth date. The entire process involved the male side inviting guests to ask for the woman's personal information, with an increase in the amount of food and drink compared to the proposal ceremony.
- Naji (納吉): The entire process involves the man's family divining auspicious and inauspicious signs at their ancestral temple and then sending a matchmaker or messenger to inform the woman's family of the results of the divination, accompanied by a gift of geese. After exchanging pleasantries, the matchmaker or messenger departs from the woman's home.

- Nazheng (納徵): The main purpose of the entire process is to dispatch matchmakers or envoys to deliver betrothal gifts, namely, five pieces of silk fabric in black and red colors that have been processed and can be directly used to make clothes, along with two pieces of deerskin. Once the ceremony is completed, the wedding enters the formal preparation stage.
- Qingqi (請期): The main process involves the selection of an auspicious wedding date by the groom's family. The matchmaker, envoy, or groom himself then visits the bride's family with a goose to discuss and confirm the auspicious day for the marriage. After receiving a written reply from the bride's family, the groom's family sends ceremonial letters, candles, cannons, and other gifts to the bride's family. In response, the bride's family reciprocates with gifts and informs their relatives and friends of the wedding date.
- Qinying (親迎): This is the most important part of the Six Rites, and the specific process is divided into three time periods: before the welcome, at dusk on the day of the wedding, and during the formal wedding procession.

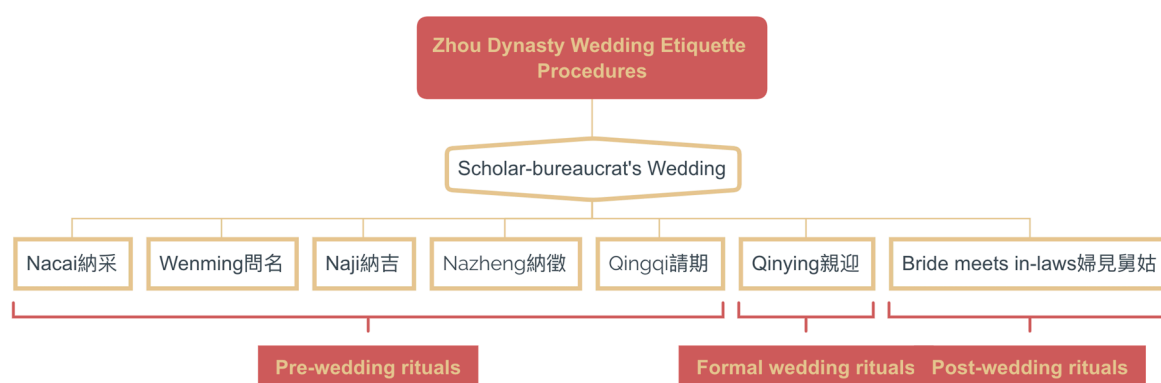


Figure 1. A diagram of the Six Rituals Ceremony during the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE). Reference from the book of *Yi Li·Shi Hun Li* 儀禮·士昏禮 (Yang 2004). Created by the authors.

Before the formal betrothal ceremony, the groom's father instructs the groom in front of the ancestral temple and hosts a banquet to drink wine, a process also known as the "jiaozi (醮子)" ceremony. The bride's parents also give the bride instructions before she leaves home in a ceremony called the "jiaonü (醮女)" ceremony. Specifically, the father admonishes his daughter to be prudent and not to disobey the teachings of her in-laws, while the mother helps her daughter fix her clothing and remind her of her duties.

On the wedding day at dusk, it is customary to prepare a tonglao (同牢)⁴ banquet. The first step is to place three tripods outside the bedroom door, each containing four types of cooked food: a small pig with its hooves removed; one pair of lungs and one pair of spines; fourteen fish; and a pair of dried rabbits with their tails removed. Inside the room, there are two dou (豆) (an ancient unit of capacity, equivalent to four liters) of hai Jiang (醢醬) (seasoning for mixing soy sauce and vinegar) of soy sauce and four dou of meat sauce. Shu (黍) and Ji (稷) (two types of grains grown in ancient times) are stewed with meat broth in four covered duns (敦) (an ancient tableware). Finally, on the east side of the hall's entrance, there is a bottle of wine containing four wine jugs and a Hejin (合巹)⁵.

On the day of the formal wedding, the groom, dressed in a jubilee costume, rides in an ink carriage to the bride's home, accompanied by two other carriages. All the attendants wear Xuanduan costumes⁶ and carry lanterns to illuminate the path in front of the carriage. The caravan stops outside the gates of the bride's house, and the host sets up a banquet. The bride, wearing a silk dress adorned with light pink hemlines, has her hair styled, and the female teacher stands on the bride's right. The bride's nieces and nephews wear black formal clothing and follow the bride. The host, dressed in Xuanduan costumes, greets the groom outside the gate and escorts him inside. The groom carries a goose and arrives at

the doorstep. The host and guests go inside the hall and place the goose on the ground, performing two bows. Then, the groom personally drives the bride’s carriage, handing over the reins to the bride. The female teacher helps the bride put on a cloak. The bride then rides in the carriage while the groom follows in his own carriage, waiting outside the gate.

After the bride arrives at the groom’s house, both the groom and bride enter the ceremonial hall. Before performing the ritual, the female servants of the groom’s family exchange water for the couple to cleanse themselves. After cleansing, the couple participate in their first meal together, symbolizing their union as one. The celebrant uncovers the wine vessel and places the tripod to the south of the altar. The attendants place the utensils, including the knife and meat dish, beside the tripod and the sacrificial meat on the dish. The celebrant sets out the condiments, and the attendants place the sacrificial dishes to the east of the meat dish, followed by the fish and rabbit and the condiments of Millet dun, meat sauce, and broth for the bride (Figure 2). The groom’s attendants arrange the seats and the food and invite the bride to sit with the groom to offer their sacrifice to Shu and Ji and the lungs of the sacrificial animal. After the offering, they eat the sacrificial meat and then rinse their mouths. They offer the wine again, and the bearer presents the liver to the couple, who offer it to the gods and then toast each other. They rinse their mouths and drink again, followed by a third round of rinsing and drinking. The celebrant then toasts the gods with a cup on the ground. The groom then leaves the room, and the attendants restore the room to its original state. The groom and bride change out of their ceremonial clothing, and the female teacher hands the veil to the bride. The groom enters to untie the bride’s hairpin and extinguish the candles, and the attendants wait outside the door for the couple to call for them. This marks the end of the six rituals, but the wedding celebration continues with the post-wedding ceremony.

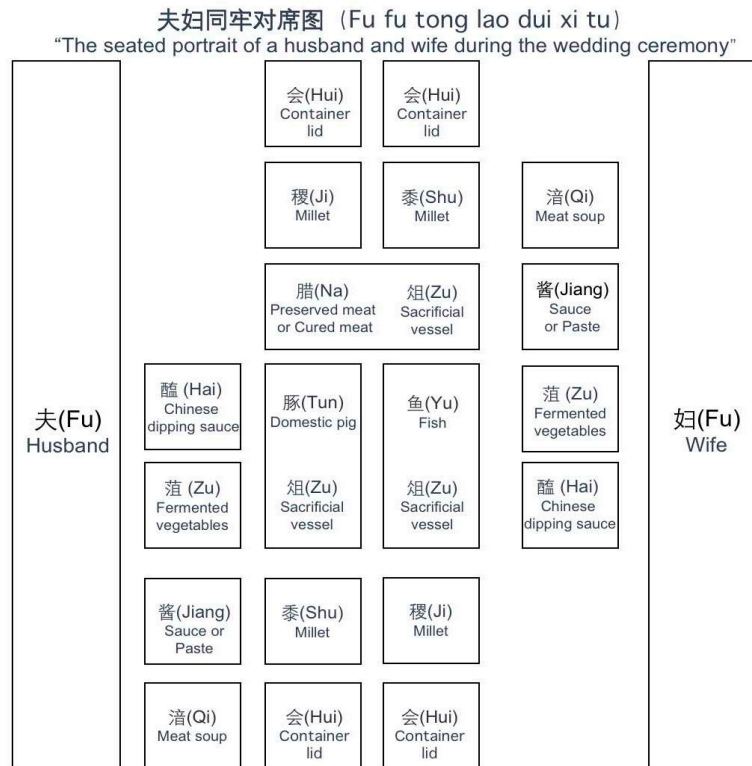


Figure 2. A diagram of the seating arrangement for the Tonglao banquet. Reference source: (Zhang 2020).

The day after the wedding, the bride is bathed in the morning, her hair is tied with a hairpin and a turban, and she is dressed in a silk gown and waits for the bride’s brides-

maids to meet her in-laws. The bride and her bridesmaids are then greeted by the bride and the bridal party with a “one-offering ceremony” (一獻之禮)⁷, in which the host takes a bottle of wine and offers it to the guests. The ceremonial escort then presents the sacrificial offering to the bride’s family before the wedding rituals come to a close. The “bride meeting her in-laws” ceremony affirms the new bride’s identity and emphasizes her respect and obedience to her parents-in-law, in accordance with Confucian values of filial piety. However, certain literary works illustrate the negative impact of excessive filial piety. For example, “*Kong Que Dong Nan Fei* 孔雀東南飛” portrays the tragic love story of Liu Lanzhi and Jiao Zhongqing, reflecting the challenges faced by married women in their in-laws’ households. Similarly, in “*Dream of the Red Chamber* 紅樓夢”, the fate of Daiyu demonstrates the significant authority of the mother-in-law in selecting a daughter-in-law. Behind these rituals, the evolving roles and rights of the new bride within the family reflect another facet of China’s traditional ethical culture of filial piety.

Additionally, the bride is required to complete the “temple visit ceremony” to formally become a member of the husband’s family. Three months after the wedding, the husband’s family selects an auspicious day and leads the bride to the ancestral temple to offer sacrifices, symbolizing the bride’s official status as a member of the husband’s family. This concludes all the wedding ceremonies.

4. The Evolution of Ancient Chinese Wedding Rituals: Transition from Ritualization to Secularization Based on the Six Rites

The order of ancient Chinese wedding ceremonies went through a development process from the establishment during the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE) to the reform during the Qin and Han Dynasties (221 BCE–220 CE), the gradual integration of folk customs during the Tang and Song Dynasties (618–1279), and the ultimate introduction of ethnic culture during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912). In the Zhou Dynasty, noble families practiced polygamous marriages, and marriage was a significant matter for maintaining the lineage. According to the description in *Zuo Zhuan·Wen Gong Er Nian* 左傳·文公二年, “When a monarch ascends the throne, he should establish good relations with neighboring countries and secure marriage alliances. He should marry a primary wife to preside over sacrifices, which is in line with filial piety. Filial piety is the beginning of propriety” (Zhu 2008). It can be seen that marriage was also a way for the state to strengthen alliances through marriage alliances during the pre-Qin period (Cao 2000). The relationship between weddings and religion can be observed on various levels, with some connections being more apparent than others (Höpflinger and Mäder 2018). Religious beliefs influence the specific content of wedding ceremonies, prompting us to explore the mutual impact between religious beliefs and wedding rituals at the level of the ceremony.

Confucian wedding rituals embody the concept of harmony between heaven and humanity, playing a significant role in upholding and perpetuating traditional values such as marriage, family stability, and filial piety. The motives and values underlying wedding ceremonies throughout different historical periods are largely consistent with those of the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE), primarily aimed at establishing alliances between two families, solidifying family influence, ancestral worship, and procreation. Scholars such as Zhai Ming’an believe that the basic paradigm of royal weddings in ancient China, especially of the Han ethnic group, comes from the wedding ceremonies of the aristocrats in the Zhou Dynasty. The royal weddings established by other ethnic groups that formed their own regimes each have their own regional and ethnic characteristics (Qu 2020). Subsequently, during the Tang and Song Dynasties (618–1279), the “Six Rites” were simplified and merged, while during the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368–1912), some ritual procedures were abolished. This demonstrates that the content and procedures of wedding ceremonies throughout history have slightly increased or decreased due to changes in the times and differences in the social hierarchy while preserving certain traditional elements.

4.1. From “Not Celebrating” to “Celebrating Weddings”

During the Qin and Han Dynasties (221 BCE–220 CE), most weddings strictly adhered to the Six Rites system of the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE). However, significant reforms occurred in the ancient Chinese marriage system during this time. The Han Dynasty’s wedding ceremony replaced the Zhou Dynasty’s ceremony, which did not include a congratulatory procedure. At the same time, the trend of extravagant weddings began. During this period, political factors played a dominant role in wedding ceremonies, particularly during the flourishing of Confucianism in the Han Dynasty. The prevailing wedding customs led by the Han rulers vividly demonstrated how political power could influence and regulate marriage.

During the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), the collection and organization of Confucian classics were basically completed, and they were canonized through the dominance of Confucianism. As a result, the life etiquette of the Han Dynasty followed the ancient system, as recorded in the *Book of Han* 漢書: “due to the agreement on wedding and funeral ceremonies, it was slightly in accordance with the ancient etiquette and not allowed to deviate from the law” (Ban 1962). In addition, the wedding congratulatory tradition first appeared in the Han Dynasty and has continued in later generations. During the Western Han period (206 BCE–9CE), Emperor Xuan of Han (73–49 BCE) issued an edict stating, “The rites of marriage are the most important in human relationships. Banquets and feasts are held to practice ritual and music. Now, some officials in the counties and states, in their arbitrary enforcement of harsh laws, prohibit the people from holding wedding banquets and feasts. This abolishes the customs of the clans and deprives the people of their joy, which does not lead them” (Ban 1962). This was the first time in Chinese history that wedding celebrations were affirmed through legislation, which changed the Zhou Dynasty’s etiquette of not using music or celebrations in weddings and emphasized the importance of banquets and feasts in conducting rituals and music (Du 1988).

During the Qin and Han dynasties (221 BCE–220 CE), the types and quantities of betrothal gifts increased significantly compared to the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE). According to the *Tong Dian* 通典, there was a total of 30 items, each with its auspicious symbolism, including cases of ink, Lu cloth, sheep, geese, clear wine, white wine, deer, and flint (Du 1988). Finally, the Confucianists advocated establishing a state religion that mirrored the laws of heaven and earth in terms of time, clothing, and ceremony. Therefore, during the Zhou Dynasty, wedding attire primarily featured the colors “xuan (玄)” and “xun (纁),” which symbolized the colors of heaven and earth. In the pre-Qin period (771–221 BCE), wedding attire tended to be simple, but with the appearance of wedding congratulatory decrees, Han Dynasty wedding attire began to evolve in the direction of luxury and splendor. The *Hou Han Shu·Yu Fu Zhi* 後漢書·輿服誌 records that “princesses, noblewomen, and concubines above the rank of consort may wear twelve-colored heavy-edged robes made of brocade, silk, gauze, grain silk, and silk gauze on their wedding day” (Sima 1965). From the changes in wedding attire, we can see that weddings during this period began to exhibit hierarchical characteristics among the imperial family and aristocracy. Therefore, political and economic factors in the Han Dynasty exerted a significant influence on the performance dimensions of wedding ceremonies, such as banquet arrangements, ceremonial music, and attire. These factors impacted the design, scale, extravagance, social expectations, and hierarchical distinctions associated with the wedding rituals.

4.2. From “Six Rites” to “Three Rites”

During the Tang and Song dynasties (618–1279), influenced by the “Revival Movement of Ancient Rites,” Confucianism was highly respected during that time period (Wu and Wang 2022). Therefore, the rulers of the Tang Dynasty (618–907) continued to use the “Six Rites” in the weddings of the royal nobility but changed the system and “abolished the system of ‘rituals not for the common people’ (禮不下庶人)⁸”. In the Song dynasty (960–1279), the same rituals were adopted by both the scholar-officials and the commoners (Yang 1993). The gentry mainly used simplified “Three Rites of Nacai (納采), Nabi

(納幣), and Qinying (親迎)”, which signaled a significant departure from the six rituals of the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE). As a result, wedding ceremonies began to shift towards secularization.

During the Tang dynasty (618–907), strict regulations were imposed on wedding ceremonies, emphasizing the significance of rituals and music and the addition of ceremonies such as the coronation ceremony and the Shao Lao ceremony (少牢禮). Records of wedding rituals during the Tang dynasty mainly focus on imperial weddings found in works such as *Kaiyuan Li* 開元禮, *Tongdian* 通典, *Xinshu* 新書, and *Tang Huiyao* 唐會要. In the imperial wedding ceremonies, the first five rituals were consistent with the customs. However, there were three notable differences compared to the Six Rites. First, the status of the male family’s representative was elevated, with the Grand Commandant serving as the envoy. Second, synchronized music performances were included, highlighting the importance of ritual and music. Third, during the stage of the bride’s welcoming, the emperor did not personally greet the bride but delegated an envoy to receive her. Additionally, the first recorded princess wedding ceremony in the Tang Dynasty included the addition of the coronation ceremony and the Shaolao ceremony, which were noble ceremonial activities with sheep as sacrifices, and the omission of the ceremony of “taking the breast meat and giving it to mother-in-law.”

The emergence of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism⁹ during the Song dynasty (960–1279) propelled Confucian thought to new heights, leading to significant changes in wedding ceremonies during this period. Song dynasty weddings became more secularized, and for the first time, specific wedding rites were formulated for the gentry, simplifying the rituals from the traditional Six Rites to the Three Rites commonly observed among the scholar-official class (Yang 1993).

At the aristocratic level, the wedding ceremonies of the Song dynasty’s imperial family closely resembled the general outline described in ancient ritual texts. However, several additions were made to the existing Six Rites. These included the presentation of the Six Rites book before the formal betrothal, the reception of the bride with the attendance of court officials, and the ceremonial ringing of bells and drums. Princess weddings also involved additional processes, such as providing the emperor’s son-in-law with clothing, wealth, and a noble residence, highlighting the elaborate and costly nature of Song dynasty imperial weddings. Subsequently, at the commoner level, the Song dynasty introduced the compilation of wedding rituals for the scholar-official class in the official ceremonial book, *Zhenghe Wuli Xin Yi* 政和五禮新儀. The rituals combined the processes of betrothal inquiries and formal engagement, simplifying the gift requirements. For instance, the San She Sheng (三舍生)¹⁰ ceremony allowed the use of sheep instead of live geese, as traditionally required in the Six Rites. Commoners were permitted to substitute wild or domestic chickens as gifts.

In addition to the aforementioned developments, the literati of the Northern and Southern Song dynasties (960–1279) (Yang 2010), in their efforts to counterbalance Buddhism and Daoism, created a system of rituals that harmonized state ceremonial laws with popular customs, leading to the Confucianization of wedding practices in society. Sima Guang, during the Northern Song period (960–1127), provided a detailed account of folk wedding procedures in his work. The specific sequence of the “Qinying Ceremony” comprised six steps: paying respect to the ancestral tablet, ritual purification, reciprocal salutations, sharing sacrificial food, pouring and drinking wine, and exchanging cups. Zhu Xi, in his work from the Southern Song period (1127–1279), simplified the six rituals into three: “Nacai (納采)” (betrothal inquiries), “Nabi (納幣)” (presenting betrothal gifts), and “Qinying (親迎)” (receiving the bride). According to the regulations, the host was required to present the marriage contract in the ancestral hall during the Nacai ceremony, while the Nabi ceremony involved the presentation and reception of documents and ceremonial etiquette. The Qinying ceremony emphasized the supplementary ritual of the host making an announcement in the ancestral hall. The first procedure of the Qinying ceremony took place in the early morning when both families set up ancestral tablets and ancestral plaques,

performing the ritual of offering sacrifices to inform the ancestors of the marriage, signifying respect for the ancestral lineage. Furthermore, the “sharing sacrificial food (同牢之禮)” ritual was replaced with the groom’s offering of wine and the bride’s offering of a cup, followed by pouring a cup without offering food, and then three cups were used for the ceremonial toast. In Confucian thought, ancestor worship and witchcraft coexisted. Therefore, the introduction of these rituals during the Song dynasty further reinforced Confucian values and emphasized the consolidation of gender roles and social responsibilities.

Since the establishment of the “Three Rites” wedding format, the influence of “*Jia Li* 家禮” on the marriage rituals of the scholar–official class during the Song and Yuan dynasties (960–1368), as well as the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1912), has been profound, leading to increased attention to the wedding ceremonies of the scholar–official class. The transition from the “Six Rites” to the “Three Rites” can be seen as a reflection of how wedding ceremonies symbolize changes in social structure, cultural norms, and perspectives on life. The evolution of state-sanctioned wedding rituals also gradually adapted to the needs and realities of the general populace.

4.3. From “Han System” to “Manchu-Han Syncretism”

During the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1912), wedding rituals and ceremonies were organized in a hierarchical manner. In the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), weddings at various levels, particularly imperial weddings, were primarily based on the established Six Rites that had been passed down through generations. During the “Qinying” stage, the “sharing sacrificial food” ritual was merged with the pouring and drinking of wine, as well as the exchange of cups. In the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), while incorporating Ming dynasty systems, the customs and regulations of Manchu culture were also introduced, resulting in a diverse and inclusive characteristic.

During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the system of Six Rites was reinstated, and there was a strict hierarchy in wedding rituals at different levels. According to the *Ming Shi-Li Zhi Jiu* 禮志九·明史, wedding ceremonies could be classified into six categories: the emperor’s marriage ceremony, the wedding of the Crown Prince, weddings of imperial princes, weddings of princesses, weddings of high-ranking officials, and weddings of commoners. Even when the Ming emperors took consorts, they still adhered to the Six Rites system. Similar to the Tang dynasty (618–907), during the “Qinying” stage, the emperor would be represented by appointed officials to receive the bride. The wedding ceremonies of crown princes and imperial princes followed a similar pattern, with the Six Rites as the main framework, emphasizing that the groom personally welcomed the bride during the “Qinying” stage. In the wedding ceremonies of princesses, the rituals performed by the bridegroom’s family were similar to those of the imperial family. The difference lay in the “Qinying” stage, where, before the ceremonial toast, the bridegroom would perform four ceremonial bows to show respect to the princess (Yi 2017). The wedding ceremonies of high-ranking officials, known as “Pin Guan”¹¹, placed a greater emphasis on post-marriage etiquette. It was required that on the second day, the groom, along with his father, and the bride, along with her mother, would offer incense and make offerings of wine at the ancestral temple. Afterward, the bride would pay respects to her parents-in-law and perform the ritual of washing their hands and presenting food, with the bride serving the parents-in-law. Additionally, according to the *Ming Hui Dian* 明會典, during the “Qinying” stage of the wedding ceremonies of Ming emperors and high-ranking officials, the “sharing sacrificial food” ritual was combined with the subsequent “Zhen Ji (振祭)” ritual, which held an equivalent status to the ancient rituals. There was no separate “sharing sacrificial food” ritual. The “Zhen Ji” ritual involved inserting the sacrificial offerings into soy sauce or salt, shaking them to remove excess grains, and then proceeding with the ceremony. After the ritual was complete, the offerings would be tasted (Shen 1989). The records in the *Ming Shi* 明史 regarding the wedding ceremonies of commoners are relatively simple. The overall ceremonial procedures are similar to those of high-ranking officials, especially in terms of modifying and restoring the three rites prescribed

in Zhu Xi's *Jia Li* 家禮 from the Song dynasty (960–1279) to the Six Rites. Additionally, in the Ming dynasty commoners' wedding ceremonies, there was flexibility to accommodate secular needs. On the wedding day, the attire and accessories could exceed their own social class. The groom would wear the official robe of the ninth rank. This practice also demonstrated the significance attached to this ritual, aligning with the concept of "Dressing beyond the usual class for a wedding, extraordinary" (Zheng 2021) in Zhou dynasty wedding ceremonies.

Despite the frequent changes in political power in China, the country's cultural form has remained largely intact (Peng et al. 2022). During the establishment of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), there was a continuation of the Six Rites system inherited from previous dynasties, along with the integration of distinct Manchu influences. The most notable change in Qing dynasty wedding rituals was the incorporation of Ming dynasty practices, combined with the addition of Manchu cultural customs. The fusion of these elements resulted in a diverse and inclusive wedding system that incorporated various aspects, including the ceremony process. The *Qing Shi Gao* 清史稿 provides detailed accounts of the wedding rituals and protocols for different social classes, including the emperor, crown princes, princesses, and high-ranking officials (Tong 1991). For instance, the illustration in Figure 3 of the "Complete Pictorial of Wedding Ceremonies" during the reign of Emperor Guangxu (1875–1908) depicts a grand procession for the bride's welcoming, with imperial envoys sent on behalf of the emperor. Additionally, it was required that one day before the wedding, officials be sent to perform sacrificial rituals at the suburban altar and ancestral temple. In addition to the traditional and standardized Six Rites, there are additional steps specific to the imperial princes' weddings. The prince and his bride must observe a nine-day post-wedding period known as "Gui Ning (歸寧)" before returning to their residence. In the case of princesses' marriages, the Qing dynasty incorporated its own customs. After the marriage is arranged, the groom must go through a ritual similar to betrothal inquiries at the Meridian Gate. On the wedding day, it is strictly required for the groom's family to pay respects at the Meridian Gate and present specific gifts known as the "Yi Jiu (一九)" ceremony, which includes a precise number of items such as 18 saddled horses, 18 sets of armor, 21 horses, 6 mules, 81 sheep, 45 bottles of milk wine and yellow wine, and 90 banquet tables. Finally, the princess must return to the palace and express gratitude after a nine-day post-wedding period. Therefore, in Qing Dynasty weddings, there was a significant association with political values. These ceremonies and regulations, which accommodated both Manchu and Han traditions, may have symbolized the endorsement and support of the Qing government.

During the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), it was stipulated that the marriage rituals for the scholar-official class should follow the Nine Ranks of the Official Ceremonial System. There were significant changes in wedding ceremonies for both the scholar and commoner classes compared to the traditional Six Rites. One notable change was the inclusion of the "Ji (笄)" ceremony¹² in the "Qinying" stage, which took place on the wedding day after the bride's family made ancestral offerings. Additionally, according to the *Pingyang Fu Zhi* 平陽府志, "wedding ceremonies varied in different regions, but generally only four of the Six Rites remained: 'Wenming', 'Nacai', 'Qingqi', and 'Qinying', although in some cases the bride's arrival may not occur" (Linfen Cultural Bureau 2018). This indicates the possibility of simplifying the ceremonies to include only the four rituals of asking for the name, betrothal inquiries, setting the wedding date, and the bride's arrival. Therefore, the Qing government-imposed restrictions and regulations on the requirements and procedures of marriage ceremonies through the establishment of laws and regulations. In addition to following the Six Rites, weddings across different social classes in the Qing Dynasty were also influenced by Manchu wedding customs, such as the "Yi Jiu (一九) ceremony," "Jiu Ri Gui Ning (九日歸寧)," "Hun ri Ji Li (婚日笄禮)," and "San Gui Jiu Kow (三跪九叩禮)". This also reflects how political power can influence the performance dimension of rituals through the promotion and shaping of the marriage system in order to achieve specific political objectives or propagate the values of Manchu culture in the Qing Dynasty.

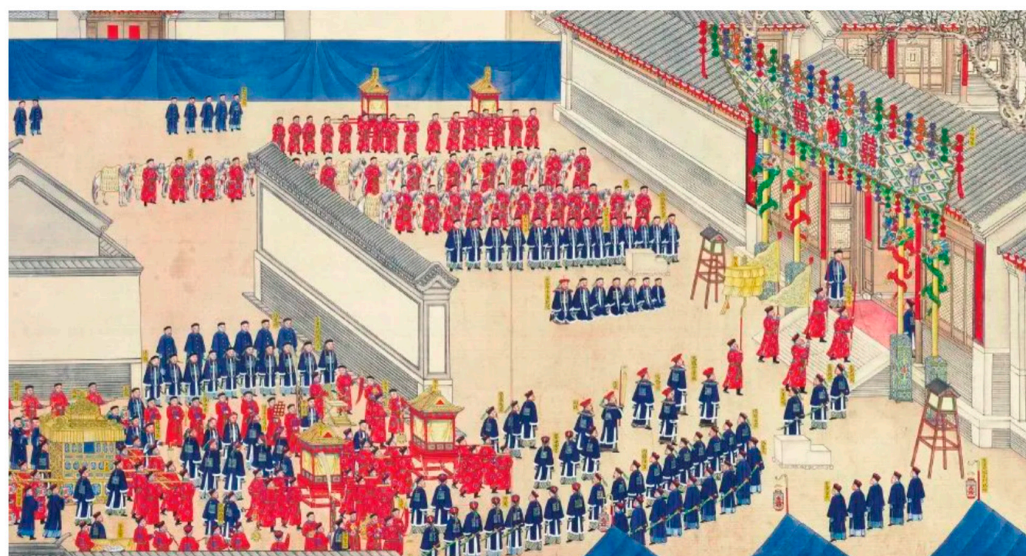


Figure 3. An excerpt from the painting “Ceremony of Enthronement and Welcoming”. It is displayed at the Palace Museum. Photo sourced from website¹³.

5. From Han Culture to Multicultural Integration: The Evolution of Ancient Chinese Wedding Customs

There exists a significant correlation between ritual behaviors and specific secular social relationships (Geertz 1993). Since ancient times, weddings have been inseparable from both “rituals” and “customs”. Rituals serve as social norms, while customs are the default rules that emerge from habitual practices (Hu 2019). Wedding customs refer to the actual forms of wedding ceremonies that people have historically practiced. They represent the accumulated conventions and habits that have developed over long periods of societal life, which official orthodoxy cannot overlook (Sun 2020). Some scholars argue that wedding customs serve as a supplement to formal wedding ceremonies, and thus, the study of weddings should not disregard these customs (Hu 2019). The customs and practices of ancient Chinese wedding ceremonies gradually developed within the context of folk social life. In this subsection, we focus on selecting relevant and representative texts related to Confucian cultural thought and enduring wedding customs, summarizing and organizing them, and conducting in-depth research. It can be observed that throughout different dynasties, rulers have played a significant role in shaping the design, scale, and extravagance of rituals, which in turn influenced the formulation of wedding ceremonies by the general public. However, on the other hand, folk customs often deviate from ritual propriety, thereby challenging the ethical norms and hierarchical order imposed by the rulers. Therefore, there exists a conflicting and harmonizing relationship between wedding customs and the formalized wedding ceremony system.

Although the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) continued the tradition of the Six Rites, the concept of social status became prominent with the improvement of material wealth. The practice of “marriage based on wealth” emerged during the Han Dynasty (Huo 2018). This change reflects the evolving cultural norms of social etiquette. Since the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE), as a result of reforms in the marriage system, tranquil and simple wedding ceremonies were replaced by lively and extravagant ones. Especially during the Eastern Han period (25–220), Cai Yong’s *Xie He Hun Fu* 協和婚賦 and the *Book of Han-Geographical Records* 漢書·地理誌 depicted numerous festive scenes of wedding celebrations featuring customs such as veiling the bride’s face with a scarf (*jinsha zhe mian*)¹⁴ and throwing a canopy (*sa zhang*)¹⁵. These customs were introduced to enhance the festive atmosphere of the wedding procession. It can be said that there is a corresponding relationship between wedding customs and rituals, and these customs have continued into later generations. In summary, the Confucian-advocated wedding rituals were primarily

intended for the upper class, especially the “Li bu xia shu ren (禮不下庶人)” concept, which emphasized the distinction between the elite and the common people. Consequently, ordinary citizens were not eligible to follow strict ceremonial practices, leading to a lack of adherence to Confucian wedding customs in folk traditions. Folk wedding practices typically embody rich cultural traditions and values. These practices reflect the specific cultural context’s understanding and importance of marriage and family. Therefore, we will examine, from the perspective of folk wedding activities characterized by significant temporal changes, the social, political, cultural, and economic norms and values expressed in religious wedding practices.

5.1. Wedding Customs Blending Northern Ethnic Minority Traditions

With ethnic integration during the Tang Dynasty (618–907), a large number of northern ethnic minorities migrated to the Central Plains region, cohabiting with the Han Chinese and gradually assimilating into the local culture. Interethnic marriages became common, and as a result, the wedding customs of the northern ethnic minorities directly influenced the wedding customs of the Central Plains ethnic groups (Shen 2012). In the Tang Dynasty, a trend emerged of blending folk wedding customs with those of the northern ethnic minorities. Scenes depicting wedding ceremonies among the common people during the Tang Dynasty can be found in Dunhuang literature, mural depictions, and other sources. The *Hun Shi Cheng Shi* 婚事程式 documented the inclusion of customs such as Cui zhuang (applying the bride’s makeup), Zhang che (blocking the carriage), and Cui hua Que shan (presenting flowers and fan-waving) in the wedding rituals of ordinary people during the Tang Dynasty. Additionally, the “*Youyang Zazu* 酉陽雜俎” also recorded changes in the wedding procession, shifting from dusk to early morning, and the wedding chamber venue transformed into a “Qing lu,” also known as the “Hundred Sons Canopy (百子帳),” a tent-like structure made of green cloth (see Figure 4), resembling the domed dwellings of northern ethnic minorities, and incorporating customs such as Nong xu, Hejin (合巹), and Heji (合髻) (Duan 1987).

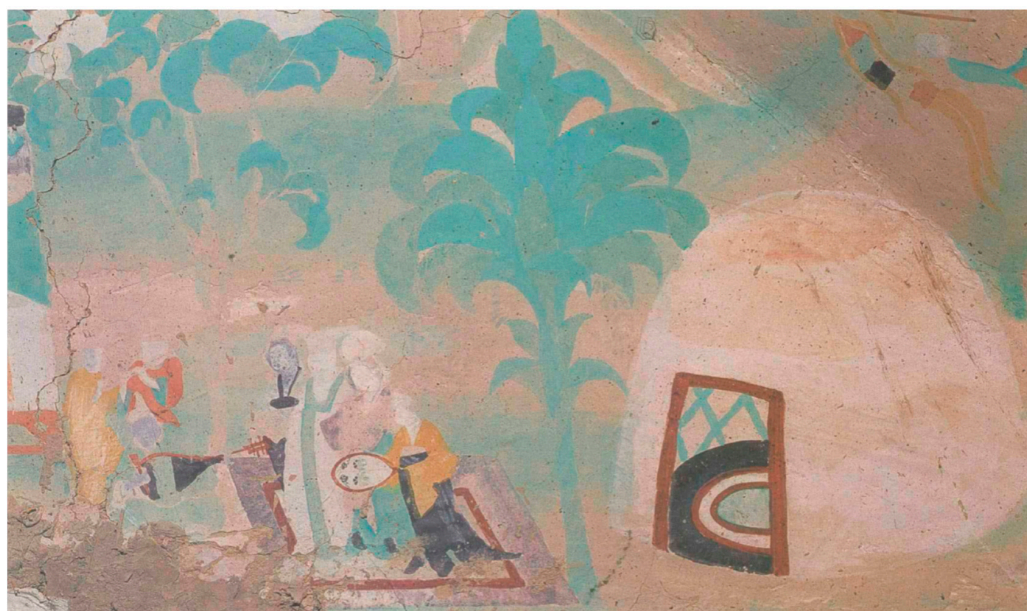


Figure 4. Depicts the “Qinglu” painting on the northern slope of Cave 186 in the Mogao Grottoes during the middle Tang Dynasty. Photo sourced from (Dunhuang Research Academy and Tan 2001).

It is evident that ethnic integration profoundly influenced the evolution of Tang Dynasty weddings, with folk customs being particularly prominent and prevalent. One of these customs is known as cui zhuang, which refers to the moment when the bride is received, and the groom’s family leads a group of a hundred or several dozen people who

collectively call out, “The bride emerges,” until the bride reaches the carriage. The practice of applying makeup originated between the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589). In the *Dongjing Menghua Lu* 東京夢華錄 (a description of the works of Bianliang, the capital of the Northern Song Dynasty), it is recorded that the purpose of applying makeup is similar to an invitation (Meng 2019). Another custom is called *zhang che*, which refers to the practice of neighbors and relatives intercepting the wedding carriage during the marriage procession. The groom’s side must offer gifts, food, and beverages to be allowed to pass. Originally, this custom was intended to bid farewell to the bride but later transformed into a desire for food, money, and entertainment. The custom of *cui hua que shan* occurs after the ceremonial greetings. The bride’s floral headdress and ceremonial attire are removed, and through poetic verses, the bride is encouraged to remove the fan that conceals her face. The bride traditionally uses a fan to cover her face during the wedding, not only to preserve modesty but also to ward off evil spirits. During the groom’s procession to fetch the bride, a playful tradition called *Nong xu* takes place, where the groom is subjected to various pranks and teasing for amusement. The ritual of *Hejin* (合巹) involves the couple drinking from the same cup during the formal meeting. After drinking together, the cups would be placed in a certain arrangement to symbolize good fortune. Lastly, *Heji* (合髻) refers to the use of the couple’s hair as a symbol of their marital union on the wedding day. Before toasting with the exchange of cups, they would each cut a strand of their hair, which would be intertwined to signify their unity of purpose.

In conclusion, the emerging wedding customs in the Tang Dynasty deviated from the requirements of traditional ancient rituals, resulting in instances of “breaching etiquette”. This starkly exemplified the contradictory relationship between wedding customs and ceremonial expectations during the Tang Dynasty.

5.2. The Wedding Customs of Seeking Wealth and Expressing Respect

During the Song Dynasty (960–1279), wedding customs and practices also reflected the expression of economic norms and values. This encompassed aspects such as dowry, wedding expenses, property inheritance, and economic support. With the flourishing of Confucianism during the Song Dynasty, scholar-officials from both the Northern and Southern Song periods actively sought to establish a system of etiquette that harmonized national rituals with folk customs (Yang 2010). Scholar-officials produced works on ritual studies such as *Shuyi* 書儀, *Hunli* 婚禮, and *Jiali* 家禮 to describe the wedding ceremonies of both the elite and commoners. Additionally, numerous literary works, including *Dongjing Menghua Lu* 東京夢華錄, *Taiping Guangji* 太平廣記, *Mengliang Lu* 夢梁錄, and *Shilin Guangji* 事林廣記, summarized the folk wedding customs of the Song Dynasty (960–1279).

Represented by *Dongjing Menghua Lu* 東京夢華錄, these works detailed twelve folk customs previously unseen in earlier periods, including “*qitiezi*” (posting the wedding notice), “*xukoujiu*” (exchanging ceremonial drinks), “*guodalizhi*” (performing formal ceremony), “*qiyanzi*” (raising the canopy), “*lanmen*” (blocking the door), “*jiabutadi*” (not touching the ground with feet), “*kuaan*” (crossing the saddle), “*zuoxuzhang*” (sitting under a virtual canopy), “*huasheng cumian*” (flower-wearing and face-concealing), “*lishijiaomenghong*” (guests compete for pieces of colored cloth), “*xufujaobai*” (bride and groom’s mutual bow), and “*qianjin*” (holding the handkerchief together). Economic factors played a significant role in Song Dynasty weddings, reflecting both the social and economic structure and the economic capacity and status of individuals and families. Simultaneously, the development of the commodity economy in the Song Dynasty (960–1279) also caused marriage customs to be more inclined towards wealth based on the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). However, Confucian scholars, such as Sima Guang, criticized this materialistic tendency, arguing that such behavior was unworthy of scholar-official marriages (Sima 1985). Confucius himself advocated marriage on the basis of virtue rather than lintel and on the basis of character rather than nobility (Zhang 2006). He also promoted frugality in rituals and ceremonies, emphasizing simplicity over extravagance.

Specifically, notable wedding customs that reflect these types of activities include “guodalizhi” (performing formal ceremonies), “qiyanzi” (raising the canopy), “lanmen” (blocking the door), and “lishijiaomenhong” (guests competing for pieces of colored cloth). “Guodalizhi” involves the exchange of clothing and utensils between the two families of the newlyweds. During the “qiyanzi” stage, when the bride is about to enter the sedan chair, the bride’s family must offer colored silk, lucky money, items, or food for her to board the sedan chair and proceed. “Lanmen” occurs when the bride arrives at the groom’s house, and guests and family members block the entrance to seek money, gifts, and red envelopes. “Lishijiaomenhong” refers to the act of hanging a torn piece of floral cloth on the door of the newlyweds’ room on the wedding day. After the groom enters the room, people eagerly grab the torn edges of the cloth, symbolizing their desire for good luck and fortune.

In fact, from the above-mentioned wedding customs, it is evident that wealth and material possessions also serve as symbolic representations to a certain extent. Confucianism emphasizes “respect (敬)” (Wu et al. 2022). The exchange of wealth during the wedding ceremony is also used as a gesture of “respect” between the families of the bride and groom, as well as within the associated communities. The custom of “xufujiaobai” (bride and groom’s mutual bow) further expresses this sense of respect between the couple. This activity involves the bride and groom bowing to each other on the wedding day, as recorded in the *Sima Shi Shu Yi* 司馬氏書儀 (Book of Rites by Sima Guang): “In ancient times, there was no custom of the bride and groom bowing to each other. It is only in the contemporary society that this practice began (Sima 1985)”. This indicates that this custom officially started during the Song Dynasty (960–1279). In the Southern Song period (1127–1279), according to the *Mengliang Lu* 夢梁錄 (Records of Dreams in Liangzhou), the ritual of mutual bowing became more elaborate, including the use of scales or machines to lift the bride’s veil. For example, female figurines found in the tomb of Hong Zicheng in Moyang County, Jiangxi Province, from the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) were adorned with a narrow strip of cloth on their heads (Gao 2001), confirming the tradition of lifting the bride’s veil during the Southern Song period (see Figure 5).

In conclusion, it is evident that economic factors can also influence the performance dimensions of wedding ceremonies. It can be seen that despite the Song dynasty’s emphasis on rituals and wealth in marriage, influenced by the style of the times and running counter to Confucianism, there were some wedding customs that still conformed to Confucian notions of respectful culture.

5.3. Wedding Customs That Embody the Compatibility of Manchu and Han Ethnic Cultures

According to historical records in the book *Ke Zuo Zhui Yu* 客座贅語, it is evident that certain wedding customs popular during the Tang and Song Dynasties (618–1279), such as “nongxu,” “zhangche,” “qinglu,” and “queshan,” were abolished during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). However, practices such as “cui zhuang” and “kuaan” were retained (Gu 2009). Consequently, the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) simplified numerous wedding customs from the Tang and Song Dynasties (618–1279) while simultaneously incorporating many Manchu cultural elements, inheriting Han ethnic wedding customs. Drawing on the *Manzhou Hunli Yijie* 滿洲婚禮儀節 (Manchu Wedding Rituals and Etiquette) as a reference and various novels and notes such as *Hong Lou Meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the Red Chamber), *Xiang Yan Jie Yi* 鄉言解頤, these included “nijin tiezi” (golden clay wedding invitations), “baoping kuaan” (carrying a bottle while crossing the saddle), “he jin yong bei” (uniting the couple with shared cups), “he jin song ci” (reciting vows during the union), “zuo chuang” (sitting on the marriage bed), “xinlang shejian” (groom’s archery), “huimen huijiu” (returning to the bride’s family nine days after the wedding). Moreover, in the *Manzhou Hunli Yijie* 滿洲婚禮儀節, the “six rituals” of “nacai” (betrothal gifts), “nazheng” (groom’s formal proposal), and “qingqi” (wedding date confirmation) were renamed as “xiading” (engagement), “xiacha” (tea presentation), and “tongshu” (letter of agreement), respectively. Additionally, new participants in the wedding ceremony emerged, such as

the “xiniang” (bride’s attendant) responsible for caring for the bride and the “binxiang” (groom’s companion) accompanying the couple (Suo 2002).

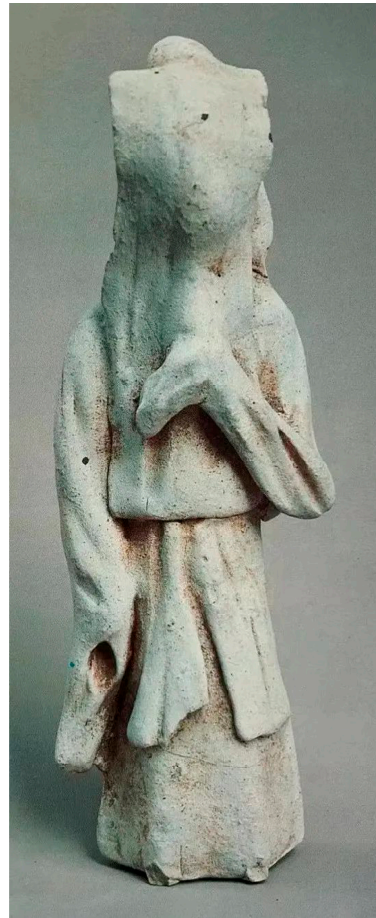


Figure 5. Portrays an image of a woman from the Song Dynasty wearing a “daigaitou” head covering. It is derived from the wooden figurines unearthed from the Song tomb at Sensen Village, Taizhou, Jiangsu Province, providing evidence of the custom of wearing “gaitou” during the Southern Song Dynasty. It is displayed at the Jiangxi Provincial Museum. Photo source: (Gao 2001).

By incorporating various Manchu customs into the wedding culture, the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) not only preserved Han ethnic traditions but also introduced new wedding customs. These customs include the following: “Nijin Tiezi” refers to a practice where, after the engagement between the two families, the bride’s family writes a response letter on a marriage certificate using clay paint made from gold flakes and glue. “Baoping Kuaan” involves placing a saddle in front of the sedan chair when the bride descends from it. Carrying a porcelain vase, the bride steps over the saddle, symbolizing the wish for safety and well-being (Pan 2013). “He Jin Yong Bei” and “He Jin Song Ci” refer to the Qing Dynasty practice where Manchu people recite specific vows during the Hejin ceremony. Specifically, it can be translated from classical Chinese as follows: “On this joyous day, the newlyweds enter into a harmonious union. Here, we bless this couple, hoping that they will live together in mutual respect and harmony”. In modern traditional Chinese weddings, this ritual continues to be preserved as an important element. Unlike the Ming Dynasty’s custom of combining the Tong Lao ceremony with toasting, which included three meals in the bridal chamber, the Qing Dynasty broke away from this tradition. Instead, elders would throw food on the roof of the chamber after each recitation, and the couple would use a pair of mandarin duck cups to symbolize their union (see Figure 6). “Zuochuang” involves the bride entering a tent in the courtyard after the mutual bowing ceremony while the groom stands guard outside. The duration of the bride’s stay in the

tent is flexible, depending on the weather. “Xinlang Shejian” refers to the groom shooting arrows towards the gate of the sedan chair after the bride arrives at the groom’s house. The bride can only descend from the sedan chair after three arrows have been shot. This custom also originates from Manchu traditions. “Huimen Huijiu” signifies the bride’s return to her family’s home after the wedding. “Huimen” refers to the three days after the wedding, while “Huijiu” refers to the nine days after the return.



Figure 6. Depicts a rhinoceros horn carving of a combined cup with the motif of an eagle and a bear. It measures 13.2 cm in height, with a diameter ranging from 15 to 6.7 cm at the mouth and a foot diameter ranging from 10.4 to 3.4 cm. The cup is designed in a double-linked style, with an octagonal shape, slanted straight walls, and a high foot. Photo source: the official website of the Palace Museum¹⁶.

In summary, Confucianism was not clearly evident in the folk wedding customs of the Qing Dynasty, while the trend of ethnic minority integration was increasingly strengthened. Furthermore, the inclusion of new rituals and activities contributed to the representation of the Manchu-Han ethnic symbol culture, serving as manifestations of encoding and rules within the cultural system of folk weddings in the Qing Dynasty.

5.4. Wedding Customs as a Result of the Collision of Chinese and Western Cultures

During the Republican era (1912–1949), Confucianism was no longer the mainstream ideology, and with the influx of Western culture, wedding customs became a blend of Chinese and Western elements, giving rise to a two-stage wedding ceremony. Traditional rituals and modern civilized weddings¹⁷ coexisted and maintained their separate identities. Descriptions of wedding rituals and customs mostly came from local gazetteers and novels, with the Nanjing wedding depicted in the *Jinling Magazine* 金陵雜誌 as a typical example. It was found that traditional wedding ceremonies, which included the six rituals, preserved customs such as bed installation from the Tang Dynasty (618–907) and the ceremony of joining cups from the Song Dynasty (960–1279), albeit with different names. Additionally, new customs emerged, including the presentation of birth characters, the exchange of red invitations, the unveiling of the bride’s face, and the meeting of families, which changed the names of “requesting a date” and “proposing a marriage” to “sending the wedding date” and “seeking consent”, respectively (Xu 2013). On the other hand,

civilized weddings took place in venues such as assembly halls or large hotels and leaned more towards Western wedding customs overall.

The form and content of wedding ceremonies reflect social and cultural changes. Specifically, regarding traditional weddings, “sending birth characters” referred to the groom’s family sending a matchmaker to the bride’s family for the formal proposal. The bride’s family would write the birth characters on rough paper, commonly known as “grass invitations,” and send them to the groom’s family, exchanging birth character documents. If the compatibility were not suitable, they would be returned. This demonstrates that the Confucian doctrine of the Mean (中庸) has a significant influence on wedding customs, emphasizing harmony. Analyzing the compatibility through the Five Elements, Yin and Yang, and other factors is an essential aspect. “Exchanging red invitations” meant that after the engagement was confirmed through the eight-character match, the bride’s family would use golden clay paint to write the entire invitation card in red and send it to the groom’s family, who would reciprocate with various gifts. “Unveiling the bride’s face” took place on the morning of the day after the wedding, where the bridesmaid would serve lotus seed soup to the newlyweds and then help the bride with her makeup, symbolizing a change in hairstyle and facial decoration before the bride’s departure. “Meeting of families” refers to a banquet held by the groom’s family for the relatives of the bride’s family, aiming to strengthen the bond between the families. Therefore, even in traditional weddings, traces of the six rituals could still be observed, reflecting the importance of the Confucian principles of “respect” and “filial piety” in wedding morality during the pre-Qin period (771–221 BCE). In civilized weddings, the six ritual ceremonies were omitted. After obtaining the consent of both parents, the couple would exchange tokens and publish an engagement notice in the newspaper, solidifying the engagement. On the eve of the wedding date, a formal wedding notice would be published announcing the wedding date. On the wedding day, the ceremony would begin with the emcee, followed by the entrance of male and female guests, the main wedding couple and their families, the marriage witnesses, and the introducers, accompanied by music. The couple would then be led to their seats by the wedding attendant, and the marriage certificate would be read by the marriage witness. The witnesses, introducers, and the couple would then affix their seals accordingly. The couple would exchange rings, perform the bowing ceremony, express gratitude, and deliver speeches after receiving speeches or flowers from the guests. Finally, the newlyweds paid their respects to the officiants and relatives after the reception (Yi 2017). This simplified wedding, modeled on the Western style, broke the framework of traditional wedding conditions and laid the foundation for the formation of the “modern new wedding”. The final stage of implementing marriage rituals among believers in Jiangnan is related to the 1911 Revolution, the “New Culture” movement, and the promotion of “Transforming outmoded customs and habits (yi feng yisu 移風易俗)” by the government of the Republic of China (Zhang 2023). Within society as a whole, the concept of marriage began to change.

The evidence suggests that during the Republican era (1912–1949), there was a departure from traditional Confucian wedding practices in China, leading to the emergence of modern weddings. This shift was driven by the influence of Western religious wedding ceremonies and concepts of marriage. As a result, modern Chinese weddings began incorporating elements such as ring exchanges and ceremonial rituals. This cultural exchange and adaptation sparked an innovative transformation in Chinese marital perspectives and wedding customs.

6. Conclusions

Ritual theory emphasizes the social functions and effects of rituals, specifically as meaningful roles, relationships, and systems that facilitate communication and foster social awareness (Ames and Rosemont 1999). For instance, Emile Durkheim focuses on the relationship between rituals and social structure, emphasizing how rituals exert power in reality to integrate social resources, control social hierarchies, and reinforce social order

(Durkheim 2011). Meanwhile, Bell proposes a model of ritual consisting of three elements: ritual as an activity, the fusion of thought and activity, and the dichotomy between actor and thinker. She points out that in a constantly changing society, rituals serve as a bridge between tradition and ongoing social transformations (Bell 1992). Rituals can also be employed to express judgments on the current society and aspirations for an ideal world (Smith 1987). As a type of ritual, weddings can, therefore, strengthen the connections between individuals and society, establish the legitimacy and stability of marriages, and also provide social recognition and support. Under the influence of Confucianism, the wedding ceremony served as a sacred and solemn testament and union of marriage. At the national level, weddings were governed by the ritual system, and the Six Rites became the central benchmark for the wedding system of later generations. Throughout the dynasties, wedding rituals were developed based on the maintenance of the traditional Six Rites, gradually incorporating folk customs and becoming more secularized. The departure from the solemn and austere wedding practices during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), with the introduction of the celebratory wedding system, established a joyous and celebratory atmosphere for weddings. In the Tang and Song periods (618–1279), this festive spirit extended beyond the aristocracy and permeated the lives of commoners. However, for the average household, marriage remained a financially demanding endeavor. The simplified “Three Rites” better suited the economic capabilities and practical needs of the common people, leaving a profound impact on the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1912). During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), various folk customs were incorporated, creating a distinct landscape that balanced the preservation of tradition with the accommodation of local practices.

The ritual system is the outcome of a gradual evolution from simplicity to complexity and from fragmented to systematic, rooted in the religious and daily lives of humans. Therefore, “ritual” and “custom” are inseparable and mutually influential. The phenomenon of wedding customs reflects, to a certain extent, the production and living conditions of the people during a certain period. Throughout different historical periods, the overall landscape of wedding customs has undergone a transition from Han Chinese cultural dominance towards the amalgamation of diverse cultures. Social context and ethnic heritage have consistently been the driving factors. Starting from the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), wedding ceremonies particularly emphasized the symbolic nature of wedding dowries. During the Tang Dynasty (618–907), wedding customs were influenced by the practices of ethnic minority groups in the northern regions, incorporating some distinctive elements. However, the emphasis on formality and material wealth that characterized the Song Dynasty (960–1279) did not persist into the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Instead, various procedures were simplified, and a phenomenon of cultural integration between the Manchu and Han ethnic groups gradually emerged during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912). In the Republican era (1912–1949), influenced by the trend of Westernization, traditional Chinese wedding customs collided with Western-style civilized weddings, eventually evolving into modern wedding ceremonies that combine elements of both cultures.

The progression of society and various cultural, political, and economic changes significantly impact the representation and practice of religious weddings. Contemporary Chinese wedding practices exhibit a complex landscape: rural weddings still maintain a considerable continuity with traditional ceremonies, while urban weddings often bear traces of “civilized weddings” (He 2018). On the other hand, wedding rituals tend to simplify, with traditional weddings being a clan affair, while modern weddings are often just a banquet. The shift from traditional to modern weddings in China primarily stems from the prevalence of individualism, which challenges the Confucian construct of a kinship-based ethical society, where family is the foundation of the nation and disrupts the formation of the family entity. Moreover, evolving marriage concepts, systems, and cultural diversity have eroded the solemnity and traditional characteristics of wedding rituals (Hu 2019). The disorderly nature of modern weddings reflects the gradual obscuring of the

original “righteousness” and diminishing significance of the ritual aspect. Wedding ceremonies mark the beginning of Confucian ideals of constructing family ethical relationships, establishing familial ties, and stabilizing the nation. Hence, the critical and inclusive inheritance of ancient “Six Rites” under the guidance of pre-Qin Confucian thought may, to some extent, call for a resurgence of ethical consciousness and aim to revitalize the sense of ceremony and spirituality in weddings. Although the “Six Rites” no longer exist, they have transformed into prototypes for modern-day proposals, engagements, and marriages in wedding ceremonies. Simultaneously, many wedding customs, such as bridal chamber pranks, lifting the bridal veil, and the post-wedding banquet, have been preserved as important components of ancient wedding traditions. Traditional Chinese weddings have transformed into a new cultural form and re-entered the public consciousness in modern times. In future research, it is imperative to contemplate the evolution and societal impact of traditional Chinese wedding ceremonies within the context of modern society. This consideration will better equip us to provide guidance for the preservation and innovation of contemporary Chinese wedding practices.

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Notes

- 1 Paired marriage is a relatively stable cohabitation of paired men and women for longer or shorter periods in primitive societies.
- 2 “*The Book of Rites*”, “*The Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial*”, and “*The Record of Rites*” collectively constitute the “Three Rites”, which are three classic works of Confucianism.
- 3 “Nacai” (納采) refers to the first rite among the Six Rites, where the groom presents betrothal gifts to the bride’s family as a marriage proposal. The term “cai” means “selection” or “choosing”.
- 4 Tonglao refers to a ritual in ancient weddings where the newlyweds partake in a meal together, symbolizing the start of their shared life. “Lao” refers to sacrificial objects, with a combination of three types of animals (cattle, pigs, and sheep) called “Tai Lao” and a combination of only two types (pigs and sheep) called “Shao Lao.”
- 5 The “Hejin” ceremony, also known as “Jiao Bei Jiu”, originated from the Zhou Dynasty as a wedding custom. “Jin” refers to a dipper made by cutting a gourd in half. In ancient times, the bride and groom each held one to drink wine during the wedding ceremony.
- 6 Xuanduan, also known as Yuanduan, is an ancient Chinese formal attire in dark colors that served as the upper garment of court dress during the pre-Qin era in ancient China.
- 7 The “One Offering Ceremony”, also known as the “Three Goblet Ceremony”, originated from the ritual system in the Zhou dynasty and is a ceremonial protocol of traditional culture.
- 8 “Rituals not for the common people” refers to the fact that the common people are too busy with their labor to be able to do the rituals adequately, so they cannot be asked to do everything in their rituals.
- 9 The Cheng-Zhu School of Neo-Confucianism was one of the main schools of thought in the Song and Ming dynasties, and it remains one of the most influential schools of Neo-Confucianism.
- 10 During the Song Dynasty’s Three Dormitory System, the Imperial Academy had 2000 external dormitory students, 300 internal dormitory students, and 100 top students, collectively known as the “Three Dormitory Students.”
- 11 “Pin Guan” generally refers to officials with a rank in ancient China.
- 12 “Ji Li” ceremony refers to the coming-of-age ceremony for Han Chinese girls.
- 13 <https://www.meipian.cn/2u2sqxz6?from=timeline> (accessed on 16 April 2023).
- 14 “Jinsha zhe mian” refers to the practice that originated in the Eastern Han Dynasty, where the bride covers her head with a special veil that the groom later unveils.

- ¹⁵ “Sa zhang” refers to the act of throwing fruits, flower petals, and copper coins inside the wedding bed canopy after the couple’s ceremonial greeting.
- ¹⁶ <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/bamboo/228487.html> (accessed on 16 April 2023).
- ¹⁷ Modern civilized weddings refer to modernized wedding ceremonies that gradually replaced feudalistic practices in Beijing after the Xinhai Revolution.

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