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# Comparison Between Chinese Traditional Marriage Customs and American Marriage Customs

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**Abstract:** Western culture attracts Chinese people's attention unprecedentedly for China is becoming more open. For the rapid development of economy, Chinese people need to cooperate with westerners more frequently. It becomes particularly important for Chinese people to learn more about western countries' culture in their communication. This paper mainly focuses on Chinese traditional marriage customs and western countries' marriage customs especially that of the United States. Though this paper, different marriage customs will be demonstrated and help people to learn more about them. This paper, based on the literature survey methods, attempts to show marriage customs of China and the US and analyze the reason of their marriage forms through contrasting their differences. Through comparative analysis between Chinese traditional marriage customs and American's marriage customs, it can be drawn out that traditional culture plays a leading role in them like marriage values and religion.

**Keywords:** Marriage Customs, Traditional Culture, Western Culture

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## 1. Introduction

Custom is an accepted way of behaving or doing things in the long process of human development and a relatively stable common practice through inheriting culture. Custom originates from the needs of collective life, from unique nation, time and region. Custom is from every aspect of human life and inseparable from human life. Marriage custom is an important component of social customs.

Marriage is an important point in one's life and a symbol of coming into the next page of one's life: forming a nuclear family and leading an independent life. Different nations form different marriage customs under different cultural background. Though comparison between different marriage customs, different customs could be learned about and different cultural backgrounds could be further displayed.

Marriage customs have been changing with the development of human society and human civilization. This paper mainly focuses on the traditional marriage customs in China and America. Many Chinese and western marriage customs have been studied, while the previous studies are quite limited and far from comprehensive. It is necessary to

make an overall view on some specific details of some marriage customs.

The group of works which have introduced some Chinese and western marriage customs includes: British and American Culture: An Introduction by Zhu Huimin, which covers the marriage customs in the UK and the USA in one chapter; An Introduction to Western Culture by Fan Weirui, which explores some common customs in western countries; and Appreciate Western Etiquettes by Liu Xinfu and Liu Hao, which includes some etiquettes about attending a wedding ceremony in western countries.

Based on above literature, this paper further analyzed the causes of these two different marriage customs and discussed the cultural distinctions between these two countries.

This paper consists of five parts. The first part is introduction, where the research background, research purpose and literature review of this paper is explained. The second chapter is comparison between traditional Chinese marriage customs and American marriage customs. Chapter three analyzes the causes of these marriage custom differences. The conclusion part gives some findings about Chinese marriage customs and American marriage customs.

## 2. Comparison of Chinese and American Marriage Customs

### 2.1. Traditional Chinese Marriage Customs

Chinese marriage became a custom between 402 B. C. and 221 B. C. Traditionally, marriage in Chinese societies has been an arrangement between families [9]. Some specific rituals came into being with the running heels of history such as three letters and six etiquette and three-fold genuflection with nine kowtows.

#### 2.1.1. Proposal

Proposing is the first ritual of the six traditional Chinese marriage rituals. Generally speaking, it was the matchmaker on behalf of the boy's family to propose to a girl's family. When the boy's parents found a girl whom they think was proper to be their daughter-in-law, they would send a matchmaker to the girl's family to express their feeling about this match. At this stage, the parents can refuse the marriage. The process may come to a halt or the proposal be accepted without objections.

#### 2.1.2. Birthday Assessment

If the girl's parents did not object this proposal, the matchmaker would go to ask the girl's birth date and hour of birth to access if the couple compatible with each other. They would call an astrologer to see if the birth dates of the bride and the groom conflict with each other. If there was any sign of astrological conflicts between the couple, which were thought to bring the relationship to disharmony, the proposed marriage would be abandoned. If the birth dates of the couple would not conflict with each other, the marriage process may go to the next phase.

#### 2.1.3. Betrothal Gifts

When the birth dates of the couple were assessed to be compatible, the boy's family would present betrothal gifts by the matchmaker to the girl's family [9]. At this point, the betrothal letter would also be sent to the bride's family. The right to decide the marriage is up to the girl's family, so if they did not consent to this marriage, they could refuse the gifts and the marriage would be abandoned. If the betrothal was accepted, usually it would last a period of time before the wedding day.

#### 2.1.4. Wedding Gifts

After accepting the betrothal gifts, the bride's family would receive the wedding gifts from the bridegroom's family. Wedding gifts varied widely depending on local customs and family wealth. Usually, the wedding gifts include: tea, fruits (oranges, red dates and pomegranates), coconuts, money and some other delicacies.

#### 2.1.5. Choosing a Wedding Date

After both families consented to this marriage and the bride's family received the wedding gifts, they would consult an astrologist to choose an auspicious day for the wedding ceremony according to the astrology in order to get some

good fortune.

#### 2.1.6. Wedding Ceremony

On that special day, the bridegroom went to the bride's home to meet and brings her back to his place with much fanfare [9]. The bride is escorted by the bridegroom's team and some of her relatives to the bridegroom's place.

The marriage process involves three bows, also called bow to Heaven and Earth, then to the groom's parents and finally to each other. In the ceremony, the new couple has to stand side by side, making these three bows. The first bow is to pay homage to Heaven and Earth, and the family ancestors; and the second to the groom's parents with gratitude for their growing up the groom; the third to each other, meaning they going to love each other and respect each other ever after [9].

### 2.2. American Marriage Customs

In term of American's marriage customs, the history background must be mention first. The United States is a country which was originally populated by Europeans especially British. American marriage customs have a lot in common with the British marriage customs. Though American marriage customs change along the development with the time and are influenced by its immigrants from other countries, most part of the marriage customs remain the same with British marriage customs.

Falling in love is the most important thing for a couple before they think about marriage. If the couple of lovers are going into marriage, the man should make a proposal by giving an engagement ring to the woman [3]. Unlike Chinese arranged marriage, American marriage is decided by both of the couple. Apparently, the courtship is the first step of the marriage. Usually the proposal requires some quality and involves the presenting a ring which symbolizes they get engaged. This engagement will last a while before the couple gets married.

Once a woman and a man decide to go into marriage, they will notice their parents respectively to show their respect. If a wedding date is set, the banns of marriage, commonly known simply as "the banns" are announced. This notice is usually placed in the local church or registry office [11].

Before a wedding ceremony is held, a couple will send wedding invitations to their friends and relatives. Upon receiving a wedding invitation, the guest should inform the couple whether they will come to their wedding.

When the ceremony is over, the bride and the groom will sign the state-issued marriage license in a side room of a church with an officer and two witnesses. That is to say, the couple's marriage gets its validity in the right day of their wedding ceremony.

### 2.3. Different Aspects of Chinese and American Marriage Customs

#### 2.3.1. Wedding Dress and Wedding Tone

In Chinese weddings, red is the tone of that special day. In traditional Chinese culture, the wedding dress of the bride is

red. Today many people wear white wedding gown like westerners, but other ritual objects and some other bride's wedding clothes are still red. Red symbols auspicious and prosperous in Chinese culture, so the wedding room is decorated with red like bright red "happiness" character is pasted on the wall, the door and other objects.

Traditionally, the bride born of a rich family would wear a phoenix coronet and robes of rank on the wedding day. The groom usually wear red long gown and mandarin jacket with a silk flower on his breast. Brides born of ordinary family would wear red clothes and a pair of red shoes.

In America and other western countries, white is the tone of weddings. Brides usually wear a white dress to symbolize purity. They may also choose to wear off-white, silver or very light-colored dress at their first marriage. A white face veil symbolizing virginity is often worn with the white wedding dress which was used to confuse the spirits who may destroy the wedding with jealousy. There are no strict requirements for the groom's clothes. The groom usually wears a formal suit with a bow tie.

In American and other western culture, red is a sign of blood and violence, while white is always related to death in Chinese culture. Different color of wedding dress also reflects the different aesthetic values of Chinese and Americans.

### 2.3.2. *Wedding Reception*

Wedding reception is very important in both Chinese and American wedding marriage customs. Chinese and American wedding reception shares both similarities and differences. In the wedding reception, the newly-wed couple needs to toast to their friends and relatives to show their thanks and the friends and relatives toast back to the couple to send their best wishes.

In traditional Chinese culture, the wedding reception often takes place in an open space like a courtyard. All neighbors, friends and relatives sit around tables. Before the meal is begun, there is always much fanfare with firecrackers and beating of songs and drums. The wedding reception is full of happy laughter and cheerful voices. People express their wishes for the couple when they toast to everybody who presents in their wedding reception.

In American, the wedding reception consists of a meal with many drinks like champagne, numerous toasts, cutting the wedding cake by the bride and the groom. The newly weds, their parents and wedding entourage will greet the guests [3]. Before the meal, the best man will make a toast to the couple, talking about their happiness and send wishes to the couple. Other friends may also make toasts to the couple. After the meal, the bride and groom will cut the wedding cake together symbolizing that they working together during their marriage. A dance follows the meal and cake and usually it starts with the newlyweds. And then others may join the dance party. Just before the bride leaves the reception, she will throw a bouquet over her shoulder to the unmarried girls and the one who catches it is thought to be the next one to marry.

### 2.3.3. *Wedding Gifts*

Usually, Chinese wedding guests will bring them with a red packet with money when they attend a wedding. It's a tradition that giving money gifts to the newlywed couple when guests attending a wedding.

However, in America, people seldom send money gifts to the couple instead of china, silverware, pots and pans, etc. The couple would often register for gifts at a store well in advance of their wedding. This allows them to create a list of household items.

## 3. Analysis on the Cause of the Differences Between Chinese and American Marriage Customs

From the comparison of Chinese and American marriage customs, it can be seen that cultural background has a great influence on the marriage customs. Culture, in a wide sense, is the sum total of material and spiritual products created by man in the historical process of a social practice. In a narrow sense, it refers to a social ideology and the political system and constitutional organization corresponding to the ideology. From the cultural perspective, Chinese and Americans differences in attitudes towards marriage and religion are the two main causes of these differences. Traditional Chinese marriage customs and Chinese attitudes towards marriage are more influenced by traditional Chinese culture like Confucianism, while American marriage custom and their attitudes are more influenced by religion.

### 3.1. *Attitudes Towards Marriage*

Marriage customs reflect people's different attitudes toward marriage. These attitudes are connected with some philosophical reasons and historical reasons.

Confucianism is the cornerstone of traditional Chinese culture. It has dominated the feudal society and even today's China for about 2,000 years. Its influence over Chinese attitudes towards marriage cannot be ignored. Confucius aimed to discipline oneself and revive the ethics of Zhou dynasty, so he put forward a series of norms. Some basic Confucian doctrines are human beings are teachable, men should pay filial piety to their parents and brothers, and people should show obedience and respect to authority. The last two doctrines exert great influence on Chinese people's attitudes to family and marriage.

Chinese culture emphasizes family as a pillar of the social stability. Young couples' uniting to a family stabilizes the society and the intention of the marriage has two main reasons: getting offspring and getting benefits for the family in traditional Chinese culture. Most Chinese marriage is well-matched in socioeconomic position. One of the most important things to consider consenting to a marriage for parents is to check these two families are of similar backgrounds. Many marriages in the past were arranged by parents and matchmakers.

After getting married, husbands and wives hold different

attitudes towards each other. Confucianism defines for the society the renowned Five Relationships: ruler-minister, father-son, husband-wife, elder-and-younger-brother, and friend-friend. Usually, husband holds a dominant position in a family.

From the point view of westerners, marriage also has two intentions: one is to give a good result of their love, and the other is to find a life-long partner so as to be fulfilled physiologically and psychologically [6]. If love does not exist between two people, they will not consider getting married. Love is priority in a marriage in American culture.

American couples enjoy equal position in their families rather than a state of subordination and domination. A couple shares their family responsibility together: earning money, doing housework and raising their children together.

Americans pay more attention to their individuality and they admire a marriage which is led from love instead of family interests.

### 3.2. Religion

The Strictly speaking, Confucianism is not a religion. Confucius influence on traditional Chinese marriage customs has explained in the above analysis. Traditional Chinese culture's influence will be discussed more in next analysis. The essential spirit of traditional Chinese culture is the equilibrium/mean and harmony that took shape during the Shang and Zhou dynasties. The features of traditional Chinese culture includes: emphasis on integration, emphasis on ethics/moral principles/relations of humanity and emphasis on inheritance/continuity/transmission. For all these reasons, Chinese people pay more attention to groups' interests like families' and countries' interests. This kind of influence on traditional Chinese marriage customs will not be explained here.

In America, religion plays an important role in their lives especially in their marriage. Western marriage may originate from the story of Adam and Eve in the holy bible. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus answered the question of the Pharisees about marriage, "Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you that precept. But from the beginning of the creation, God made them male and female. For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother; and shall cleave to his wife. And they two shall be in one flesh. Therefore now they are not two, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." Christianity influences marriage customs in many ways: most people will choose church to hold their wedding ceremony regardless of their religious faith; the couple should speak out their wedding vows when a priest officiate the ceremony.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper mainly talks about some aspects of marriage customs in traditional Chinese culture and American culture.

The reason why traditional Chinese marriage customs is compared with American marriage customs is that China has learned many from western marriage customs, and it is very common to see many western elements in present Chinese marriage. Traditional Chinese marriage customs are more representative comparing with those marriage customs integrating with western marriage customs.

This paper displays many differences in traditional Chinese marriage customs and American marriage customs, which can help more people to learn about American marriage when people communicate and trade with Americans more frequently.

This paper also tries to point out some reasons of these differences from the perspective of the causes of the different attitudes towards marriage of Chinese and Americans, the philosophical analysis of traditional Chinese marriage customs and the Americans' religious influence over their marriage customs.

Due to the limitation knowledge of the author, there are still many defects in this paper, and further analysis need to be done in the future.

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