

Performing Gender Nostalgic Wedding Photography in Contemporary China

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Résumé de l'article

En examinant des scénarios sexués et des performances dans le cadre des studios de photographie nostalgique en Chine, cet article explore les ressources historiques et culturelles disponibles pour un projet particulier de rapport entre les sexes dans la Chine contemporaine. Il suggère une résonance entre le projet post-maoïste portant sur le genre, le projet moderniste de la Chine et la construction de l'identité culturelle chinoise, en soutenant que le projet post-maoïste contemporain de rapport entre les sexes reste hanté par l'idéologie maoïste des rapports de genre et qu'il s'exerce à travers des négociations interculturelles avec le regard occidental.

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PERFORMING GENDER

*Nostalgic Wedding Photography in Contemporary China*¹

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Since the late 1990s, it has been very fashionable for newlywed Chinese couples in big cities to have wedding photos taken in professional photography studios. The studios provide wedding photography packages offering a choice of scenes and costumes representative of different Chinese historical periods and gender roles. In popular studios in big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, a middle range price package (RMB 5000 or CAD 700 and more) includes five to eight sets of costumes and corresponding studio settings. Apart from the “must have” Western white dress and black tuxedo, newlywed couples often choose other sets of costumes ranging from ancient Han² Chinese traditional wedding clothes to Western-style formal evening wear and pre-revolution Han Chinese everyday costumes.

By examining gender scripts and performances in studio wedding photography, this article explores some of the historical and cultural resources available for an urban upper-middle-class gender project in

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1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Canadian Women's Studies Association 2006 Conference. My special thanks go to Ms Cynthia Xin Xu for kindly showing me her wedding photos, which inspired me to write this article. Cynthia also read the first draft, gave me valuable supplemental information, and commented on my interpretations. I also sincerely appreciate the kindness of her and her husband, Mr Wang Lin, for authorizing me to use their wedding photos in this article.
 2. Han is the name of the biggest ethnic group in China, which constitutes more than 90% of the total Chinese population. The Han Chinese culture is different from that of minorities in China. It has enjoyed a superior status in Chinese history, and has a special reference to traditional Chinese ideas found in classical texts, such as the Confucian classics.

contemporary China. To illustrate, I present a set of wedding photographs taken of a Chinese couple in Beijing in 2005. An examination of various images, as represented in the studio settings, costumes, poses and interactions of the couple in these photos, reveals ways in which gender repertoire is constructed, negotiated, challenged, and subverted. Further investigation exposes the historical, geographical, social, and cultural resources invoked in this repertoire's construction and subversion, and suggests a resonance between the gender project and other social projects such as China's modernity project, and the cultural project of Chinese identity construction.

Contexts

Ever since Simone de Beauvoir claimed that "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (1989: xix), feminists (poststructuralist feminists in particular) have viewed gender as a socially shared and historically constituted act. Gender is understood as a cultural sign of a historical situation. Judith Butler (1990, 2003) argues that a woman does not exist in a pre-social or prediscursive state; gender is a performative accomplishment. By repetitively enacting symbolic social signs, individuals "do," dramatize, and reproduce gender. People do gender in mundane ways and their performances take various forms. Fenstermaker and West (2002), West and Zimmerman (1987), and West and Fenstermaker (1993, 1995) have developed a sociological understanding of gender as a situated doing and an accomplishment through social interactions. While Butler, West, Fenstermaker, and Zimmerman all conceptualize gender as not an attribute but a doing, they approach this doing in different ways. Drawing on psychoanalysis and poststructuralist language theories, Butler emphasizes that gender is discursively constituted and is performed through discourse, broadly defined. Taking a sociological approach, West and Fenstermaker focus on how gender is done in interactions, also broadly defined. Since the focus of this study is on the visual aspect of gender performativity in studio wedding photography, I will adopt Butler's approach.

In this article, I use the term "gender project" following on Butler's ideas about gender and performance. Thus, the construction of gender is seen as an essential element in a designed social project existing at various national, group, and individual levels. Butler's discussion emphasizes the performing stage of a gender project, and investigates

the enactment of gender scripts and the subversion possibilities opened up by gender performance. Here, I will extend the discussion further by tracking the designing stage of a gender project. I will investigate the making of gender scripts, examine their constitutive elements including various signs as represented in settings, costumes, and poses. I will also explore the various cultural resources that gender scripts draw upon, and demonstrate how the construction of a gender project operates in the matrix of class, race/ethnicity, and age and is tangled with and complicated by other social projects — in this case, that of cultural identity construction and China's modernity.

In China, studio wedding photography is an important site for an individual woman to participate in the construction of her own gender project. While real-life gender performance is performative in Butler's terms, the performance in studio wedding photography shares more similarities with theatrical performance. As in theatrical performances, the scene and roles displayed differ from actual life experiences. In the theatre, certain subversive acts that might arouse anger or invoke punishment in real life may be tolerated or even receive applause, because they are perceived as just an act. Studio photography performances similarly open space for the imagination and suggest possibilities that are not yet available in real life for the contestation and transgression of gender arrangements. As Butler suggests, the new "modality of gender" (2004: 422) that these performances generate has the potential to be assimilated into real life and constitute future gender realities. New gender modalities do not appear from nowhere. Their sources and inspirations may be perceived as incipient in the performer's existing everyday gender practices, which are backed up by her concrete, material, and social background.

To contextualize gender scripts in studio wedding photography, I will give a brief overview about the ideas of gender in Chinese history. In traditional China, patrilinealism, filial piety, patriarchy, and cosmology are important sources for the early development of Chinese ideas on family and gender (Hinsch 2002; Ebrey 1993). These ideas became integrated into Confucianism during the early imperial period. The Confucian gender system was firmly established by the Song dynasty (960-1279) and has had a long-lasting influence on understandings about gender throughout Chinese history.

The two pillars of Confucian gender ethics (Ko 1994; Hinsch 2002) are the dictum of “three obediences” or *sancong* (obedience to the father before marriage, to the husband after marriage, and to the son after the husband’s death) and the doctrine of separate spheres of inner and outer (*neiwai*), with man being associated to the outer and woman to the inner (*nanzhuwai*, *nuzhunei*). As Tani Barlow (1991) notes, under the Confucian conception of gender, Chinese women’s gender identity was not assumed to be based on anatomical difference but was constructed primarily around her family position as daughter, wife, and mother.

Even though Confucianism has been the dominant gender discourse in Chinese history, ideas of gender and women’s virtue and the Confucian gender system itself evolved over time. Lisa Raphals (1988) demonstrates that in early China (Warring States and Han dynasty, B.C.E. 403-8), women were perceived as intellectual and moral agents and they embodied intellectual, political, and ethical virtues. Bret Hinsch’s (2002) research shows that instruction books for women from Han (B.C.E. 206-8) to Tang (618-907) emphasized the importance of recognizing and utilizing women’s ethical and intellectual abilities. Under the influence of Song (960-1279) and Ming (1368-1644) neo-Confucianism, women’s familial virtues were encouraged and their intellectual virtues were de-emphasized (Ebrey1993). This neo-Confucianism put great emphasis on the physical separation of men and women, the submission of the woman to the husband within the family, and the exclusion of women from direct or indirect political activity (Hinsch 2002). By the seventeenth century, women had lost their property rights and were subjected to increasingly strict sexual mores, particularly the requirements for chastity and prohibitions against remarriage (Ko 1994).

While these are the dominant gender discourses in Chinese history, there are differences between what Dorothy Ko (1994) calls the “official ideology” of the Song neo-Confucian canon, the “applied ideology” of instruction literature, and the “ideology in practice” of literati and officials. There are gaps between normative prescriptions and lived realities. In addition, since individual social position under patrilinealism³ was not only defined by gender but also by other social

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3. Patrilinealism characterises kinship systems based on tracing family relationships through the male line, and the Confucian gender system incorporated many patrilinealist values (Hinsch 2002). Early Chinese patrilineal values not only espoused large extended families of multiple generations and lineages

roles, women's life experiences may differ greatly depending on their class, age, and other social locations.

The 1911 revolution ended imperial rule in China. Under the iconoclastic May Fourth New Cultural Movement (1919-1925), traditional Confucian gender codes on women were under attack. Western feminist thinking was introduced into China. The Chinese nationalists incorporated women's liberation into their national resurgence agenda, and argued that women's liberation is an important part of building a healthy, modern China. A new category of women emerged in the big cities. These women had some education, some financial resources, and were more involved in public and social life outside of the home (Finnane 1996). They belonged to a new category known as the "new women," or *xinnuxing* [new female sex]. As Barlow (1991) suggests, the *nuxing* was constructed as a political category that shifted women's loyalties from the family to the nation and served the nationalist agenda. She also argues that the category is also defined by sexual physiology and based on a Western, exclusionary male/female binary. It emphasizes the opposition of men to women as well as sexual attraction. The emancipated *nuxing* in the Republican era (1911-1949) abandoned traditional marriage and morality, experimented with nurseries, free abortion, and free love (Leader 1973). She became a sign of modernity in a bourgeois "new China."

In the People's Republic of China (since 1949), two competing and overlapping gender projects can be distinguished: the Maoist and the post-Mao gender project. In the Maoist era, gender equality was written into the Constitution and became a state-sponsored dominant discourse. Women were encouraged to participate in production, especially in those occupations and tasks that were traditionally perceived as belonging to males. However, a gendered division of labour still existed both at work where more men held management and

descended from a common male ancestor, but also emphasized that the individual should be sacrificed for the interest of the kin group, and that the young should obey the old. Therefore, even though patrilinealism established a series of strict hierarchies, they were not all based on gender. A woman's roles in the kinship hierarchy changed over the course of her life, and some female roles gained in prestige. For example, under patrilinealism mothers were accorded profound respect and devotion. Women could manipulate their social positions in these intersected hierarchies to their own advantage. Please see Hinsch's (2002) discussion on women's social roles under patrilinealism.

decision-making positions, and within the family where women were still mainly responsible for reproductive labour.

The Maoist discourse of gender equality has been challenged in the post-Mao era. It is seen as equality measured by male standards. The idea that women can do anything that men can do has been perceived as distorting women's nature and masculinizing Chinese women. Feminists in the West charge that the communist state strategically deployed a discourse of women's liberation as a sign of modernity. Not only were Chinese women not liberated from the patriarchy, but they carried a double burden in the new form of the socialistic patriarchal family.

There was a general disappointment among Western feminists with the fact that in the Mao era the revolution for women in China was in fact postponed (Andors 1983; Johnson 1983; Stacey 1983; Wolf 1985). In order to contest the state-defined notions of women and women's liberation, feminists in China separated gender from class as a legitimate category of social analysis by strategically employing an essentialized conception of women (Chen 1999; Cui 2003; Dai and Yang 1995; Li and Li 1989; Li and Wang 1988; Meng 1993; Yang 1999; Zhang 2003). In both academia and popular culture, there was a surge of interest in gender differentiation, which was achieved through refeminizing Chinese women. This discourse of femininity developed as a political tool to resist Maoist statist control and aimed to resymbolize women's gender differences that had been suppressed in the Mao era.

This discourse was exploited by the consumer market and mass media in the 1990s. As a result, a modern hyper-femininity has been constructed which often exploits women's sexuality as a commodity and ultimately objectifies and oppresses women rather than liberating them. Even though the post-Mao gender project is often represented as a result of the rejection of the Maoist gender project and is thus seen as its opposite, there are historical continuities and complex relations between the gender projects of these two historical periods. As I will show, the Maoist gender project is embodied in contemporary Chinese women's outright rejection, nostalgic reminiscence, and unconscious internalization of the Maoist gender ideology through their everyday gender performances.

Studio Wedding Photography and Gender Projects in Contemporary China

Marriage involves a radical change in status, role and identity. For many young Chinese, it symbolizes the transition from childhood to adulthood. In the cities, it is the time when most young Chinese move out of their parents' home and live independently.⁴ They start to take on adult gender roles and construct their own gender identity and family life. In studio wedding photographs, newlywed couples put on historical costumes, pose in arranged studio settings, and perform various historical and cultural gender projects. The sets of gender images in a wedding photo package represent both a repertoire for gender identity construction and ideas of what constitutes proper and ideal femininities and masculinities. These are both shaped by and constitutive of a range of gender projects currently active in China.

In the 1980s, Chinese couples started to take Western "white wedding" photos. In the mid- and late 1990s, Taiwanese wedding studio businesses spread across China. Many of the most popular wedding studios in big cities are owned by Taiwanese businesses. Traditional Chinese costumes have been popular for wedding photography in Taiwan since the 1990s (Adrian 2003). This fashion was introduced to Mainland China with the expansion of the Taiwanese wedding studio business.

The majority of clients for nostalgic studio wedding photographs are young women and men born in the 1970s and 1980s. They came of age in the reform era (post 1978) and started to marry in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These wedding photos represent a gender project specific to certain members of this generation and gender cohort.⁵ I

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4. Before the housing reform in the middle of the 1990s, most married couples had to wait for housing distributed by their workplaces. Because of the shortage of housing in many big cities, some married couples had to live in a dormitory for singles or with their parents for many years after they had married. The reformed housing distribution system provides low-interest mortgages for first time real estate purchases and an affordable (non-profit or low-profit) housing supply. This has made it possible for many young people to buy their own apartments and move out of the dormitories or their parents' homes shortly after marriage.
 5. I am inspired by Lisa Rofel's (1999) cohort analysis of women workers in China. Rather than distinguishing cohorts in terms of biological or social generations, she defines cohorts based on identity formation during specific political moments and distinguishes three cohorts of women workers: the socialist revolution, Cultural Revolution and post-Mao era cohorts.

distinguish gender cohorts in this article based on the different gender construction projects women and men buy into when they come of age in a specific context. The age cohort that grew up in the reform era has been exposed to the post-Mao gender discourses that emphasize gender differences.

With the growing gender consciousness facilitated by both state and popular culture, women are increasingly encouraged to express a supposedly natural femininity that socialism is thought to have repressed. The image of a proudly sexual woman is constructed in contradistinction to what now seems to some to be a ridiculous, unnatural, politicized, and sexless Maoist woman. Young women are encouraged to indulge in the pleasures of exploring their once-forbidden femininity. They construct their own gender projects within this framework by appropriating resources and inspiration from official and popular discourses, as well as from various previously rejected historical and cultural gender projects.

The photos referred to in this article belong to a well-educated, urban couple currently living in Beijing. The bride, Cynthia Xin Xu, was born in 1977 and grew up in a big city in China. After finishing her university education and working in a state-owned institute for three years in the northern Chinese city of Shenyang, she immigrated to Canada where she pursued an M.A. degree. At the time these photos were taken, she had returned to China to get married. Her husband, Wang Lin, received a university education in China where he works as a middle-level manager for a large construction company in Beijing. The gender project represented in these studio wedding photos reflects their well-educated, urban, cosmopolitan, and middle-class social status. The couple actualizes and reproduces the post-Mao gender project in nuanced and individual ways. These photos represent one version of the many variations of revisionist and nostalgic gender construction in contemporary China.

Gender Scripts in Nostalgic Studio Wedding Photos

The wedding photos in this article show four sets of costumes and settings that can be understood as representing four historical periods: traditional China (prior to the sixteenth century), the late imperial period (late sixteenth to early nineteenth century), the Republican Era

(1910s to 1940s), and “modern” times.⁶ Despite the historical heterogeneity and diverse individual manifestations of gender throughout Chinese history, the gender scripts in the studio wedding photography selectively represent only a certain set of stereotypic gender images of each historical period. These stereotypes reflect contemporary popular understanding about Chinese history and Chinese gender tradition. They are a projection of popular fantasy rather than realistic depictions of history. They are empty containers into which anyone can fit. They can be anybody but are also nobody. They are the disembodied that anyone can embody.⁷

Even though gender images in these photos are fantasized and dramatized representations and are different from gender images in everyday life, they nevertheless represent the gender project many young Chinese today are pursuing. They also reveal the cultural resources and constitutive elements beneath the ideal of gender in contemporary China. An analysis of these photos thus will contribute to our understanding of gender in contemporary Chinese society.

The first set (Figure 1) represents the traditional Chinese ideal marriage union of the *caizi jiaren* (the scholar and beauty romance). The couple wears traditional Han Chinese wedding costumes. The bridegroom’s costume resembles that of a *zhuangyuan* [number one scholar],⁸ symbolizing a wish for an ideal intellectual/official career path for the future husband. The bride’s costume is *fengguan xiapi* (the phoenix crown and embroidered tasseled cape), the ceremonial dress worn by noblewomen for formal occasions. These costumes are derived from theatrical representation rather than real-life usage and were used as wedding costumes in many parts of China until the twentieth century. The background for these photos is plain red without any furniture, or sometimes an observable painted background of *donfanghuazhu* (the traditional wedding chamber with red candles).

6. I denote “modern” times in the context of this photo package representation. Although Western-style white bridal dresses and black tuxedos have existed in the West for over a century and have been adopted by some Chinese as wedding costumes since the early twentieth century, these costumes represent a modern and contemporary reintroduction of the western model in this wedding photo package, as I will show later in this article.

7. I am paraphrasing the title of Judith Zeitlin’s (1997) article, “Embodying the disembodied: representations of ghosts and the feminine.”

8. *Zhuangyuan* was a title conferred on the person who came first in the highest imperial examination.

The second set (Figure 2) represents the life of an elite couple in the late imperial era. The costumes are typical of those worn in late nineteenth to early twentieth century China. Both the man and the woman are in brilliant silk and satin clothes. The woman's costume includes a multilayered, high-collared jacket and a long pleated skirt. Her long hair is combed up into a chignon with delicate accessories. Her dark-colored and elaborate clothes and jewelry indicate her family's social and economic status. Behind the couple are a redwood antique shelf with a collection of porcelain items and a Ming-style side table. In one photo, the man is holding a folding fan painted with a traditional Chinese landscape, and in another, he is holding a traditionally bound Chinese book. These objects indicate that he is a member of the literati. The woman is holding a round silk fan with a traditional painting of a beautiful woman. This indicates that she has plenty of leisure time and leads a comfortable life. The nail protectors on her little fingers indicate that she has long nails and does not do physical labor — she has servants.

The first and second sets of photos convey a similar historical gender project based on the institutionalized Confucian ethical code of *sancong*, or the three obediences. The woman's costumes for these two sets of photos are big and loose, covering most of her body. All the buttons are done up, and the skirts are long. Her sexuality is covert. The color and style of her clothes, including the decorations on the surface of her garments, all function as signs of her family, social, and economic status. In one photo from the first set, the bridegroom is making *zhuoyi* (a slight bow with hands folded in front) and the bride is making a curtsy, as if they are addressing their parents, kin, in-laws or other elders.

In contemporary Chinese perception, young men and women were regarded as adults after they were married.⁹ These photos show the couple's transition from childhood to adulthood through learning and

9. In traditional China, hairpinning for girls and capping for boys symbolize that they have come of age, and are ready for marriage. This tradition gradually declined in practice and was officially stopped in the Qing dynasty. In some places (for instance, in the Chaoshan area), capping and hairpinning are still carried out, but as part of the wedding ritual. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, girls would have hairpinning on the wedding day. Because of the disappearance of the capping and hairpinning ritual, the wedding becomes the symbolic moment of reaching adulthood. For a woman, it symbolizes her transition from *nu*/girl to *fu*/kinswoman; whereas for a man, marriage is one of the two things that indicate adulthood: forming one's own family and establishing a career (*chenjia liye*).



Figure 1. *Traditional China.* All photographs courtesy of Cynthia Xin Xu and Wang Lin



Figure 2. *Late imperial time*

practicing proper gender roles and behaviors. The second set of photos shows that the children have grown up and entered adult life. The color of the woman's clothes is dark, which indicates her age — she is not a newlywed young woman, but is more likely a competent wife and mother managing a big household. Cynthia told me that while taking this set of photos, the photographer kept telling her to lower her head. In these photos the couple's gestures are sedate, dignified, and contained, and their physical contact is limited. Their expressions are serious; they hardly smile. In the first set of photos we see a scene of celebration in a joyous atmosphere. This impression is associated with the full bloom of the Chinese empire, a period of great prosperity. The second set of photos represents the end of that empire. The historical background for the second set of photos is the eve of the revolution of 1911, which ended imperial rule in China. The performers' serious expressions and contained poses convey a sense of mourning for lost glory and the end of the empire. These photos represent a meditation on the imagined, ideal, traditional, large Chinese family structure that gradually disappeared in the twentieth century.

The third set of photos (Figure 3) represents the Republican era (1910s to 1940s) when the sexy new modern woman (*xin nuxing*) and her intellectual/professionalized husband lived a life combining Western and Han Chinese styles. The woman has short, permed hair and wears a revealing, sleeveless, high-split silk *qipao*¹⁰ (a gown which combines Western cutting techniques and traditional Manchu-style female garment style). The fabric is covered in an adapted version of traditional Chinese hand-painted patterns. Since the 1920s, women who wore the *qipao* have usually belonged to the emerging middle class, and were most likely to live in the modernizing cities. They were the sign of modernity in a bourgeois new China.

In this set of photos, the woman's body is revealed by the tightly fitting, sleeveless *qipao* with a high split. Her long, dangling earrings and open fan add a hint of flirtation. Her sexuality is openly exhibited. The man wears a *Zhongshanzhuang*¹¹ (Chinese tunic suit which originated

10. The *qipao* is known in the West by its Cantonese name of cheongsam. It is adapted from a Manchu female garment and emerged in China in the 1920s.

11. It is also known as the Sun Yat-sen jacket, named after Sun Yat-sen (which is Sun Zhongshan's alternate name) who first wore it at the founding of the Nationalist Party in 1914. It was later claimed by Mao as the authentic Chinese

in the West and was introduced into China by the Japanese). The fabric is Western-style pin-striped wool. The *Zhongshanzhuang* was popular among students and young urban intellectuals in the Republican era, and was an indication of a Western-style education.¹²

The setting also evokes a hybrid style. A carved wooden screen (*pingfeng*) is behind the couple, while a phonograph sits on a Chinese Ming-style side table. The phonograph implies the couple's new social life: music, parties, dancing, and physical contact between the sexes. Geographic signs are also observable in these photos.

The bamboo products and carved sandalwood fan indicate the south of China, while the phonograph reveals the popular Westernized culture associated with urban areas, particularly the treaty port cities.



Figure 3. Republican era.

These signs work together to point implicitly to the sophisticated colonial city of Shanghai. The Chinese furniture and the objects in their hands indicate the couple's connection to the former imperial family, implying that the couple may be of royal descent. However, in this set of photos, the couple represents the new, modern woman and the post-Confucian intellectual man who received western style education in the Republican era, living a modern life. They signify China's transition from tradition to modernity, combining the best of East and West.

garment (Fianne 1996). *Zhongshanzhuang* is adapted from Prussian-style military uniforms and was first used by Japanese male students. Later, it was adopted by the new Chinese army founded in 1901 (Fitzgerald 1996).

12. Western style education here does not necessarily mean studying abroad, but education in the new Western style school system of Republican China.

The fourth and final representation (Figure 4) shows a fully Westernized couple in white wedding gown and black tuxedo. The bride's long fitted dress is sleeveless with a V-neck. It draws the outline of her breasts and reveals her arms. The setting is a Western-style living room with white and gold decorations. Over the fireplace is an oil painting of a landscape. Electric candelabra are on the wall, and a Western-style armchair is in the centre. There is no Chinese element in either the costumes or the setting. In the bride's hands are red roses and white lilies, which symbolize love and virginity. The setting and costumes evoke a Western middle- or upper-class lifestyle; the couple is urban and cosmopolitan. Their appearance points to the idea of the modern nuclear family, with a narrative of love and romance as its foundation. Here the transition is complete: the couple is Westernized and therefore totally modern. Signs of their Chineseness are eradicated but for their Chinese faces.

In the scripts, the man's suitcase, the book in his hand, and the *zhuangyuan* costume all indicate his connection to the outside world. They represent a masculinity associated with a man of letters. Even though this man's career path has changed from that of the traditional intellectual/official to that of the Westernized and professionalized intellectual or businessman, he is assumed to be the provider of all the signs of income in these photos. On the contrary, we do not observe any sign of the woman having a public life or a career. Instead, domesticity and a leisurely lifestyle are implied by her basket, fan, nail protectors, and the phonograph. The man's body is fully covered in all these photos. As for the woman, her body contours are the focus of the costumes; a considerable portion of her body is revealed in the last two sets of photos. In this gender project, the ideal "modern" woman is an upper-middle-class, educated, beautiful, young, heterosexual woman. She is expected to maintain traditional Chinese women's virtues and domesticity, but her attitude towards Chinese tradition is ambiguous. She is open to Western influences and is the object of romantic love and male desire. Her gender roles include being a virtuous but also sexy wife and a good mother of a modern nuclear family.

Gender is produced through "the stylization of the body" (Butler 1990: 140) which conveys various cultural signs related to gender. These cultural significations are inscribed on, demonstrated through, and produced by bodily gestures, movements, and adornments. The decorations, furniture, costumes, accessories, and other objects in these



Figure 4. *Modern times*

wedding photos are chosen by design and function as cultural markers. They constitute one layer of gender-signifying practice — the settings for gender acts. Another layer of the gender script emerges from the performers' bodily postures, movements, and interactions with each other. They work together to enact the script and put this gender drama into play.

When theorizing gender as performative, Butler (1990, 2004) points out that “gendering-as-doing” means that gender cannot be simply imposed onto a passive, lifeless body from outside, but needs the performers’ participation and cooperation. Discourses that constitute patterns of femininities and masculinities are embodied and enacted through individual practices and in various nuanced ways. How gender is played out is subject to negotiation, struggle and resistance. This opens up possibilities for the cultural transformation of gender. Consequently, construction is not opposed to agency but is its very premise. It both circumscribes and enables agency. Gender performance is a public action that relies on a set of conventions and interpretations (a gender regime) shared by the performer and audience. An individual’s gender act is not only constituted by but also constitutive of this regime of gender.

In these wedding photos, the gender scripts are not simply imposed upon the young couple. At each stage, they exercise their agency in negotiating and constructing their own versions of the gender project. In the first stage, the photography studio investigates the popular gender discourses and discovers the images young couples prefer to enact. After a process of filtering and selection, a repertoire is established for clients to select from. Consumers participate in this process of selection and filtering and help to construct such a repertoire. For instance, some studios try to include Japanese kimonos and settings in their repertoire, but this is generally not well received.¹³ The customer’s reaction is, “I am Chinese, why should I wear Japanese clothes for my wedding picture?” (This reflects the anti-Japanese sentiment prevalent among many Chinese in contemporary China.) Thus, the kimono is taken out of the repertoire.

In the second stage, clients choose a combination of costumes.¹⁴ They decide which gender images to act out, and through the

13. The inclusion of Japanese kimonos is brought by Taiwanese wedding businesses that dominate the wedding studio photography business in Mainland China. Taiwan was colonized by Japan from 1895 to 1945. Elite Taiwanese during the Japanese colonial period preferred to dress brides in Japanese kimono rather than in Western-style bridal wear. Popular bridal photography in the 1990s in Taiwan often includes Chinese, Japanese, and Western costumes (Adrian 2002).

14. The price for the sample package referred to in this paper was RMB 5800 (the average annual disposable income for Beijing residents in 2004 was RMB 15,637). Couples can choose five sets of costumes.

combinations, they construct their own version of the gender project. When the photos are shot, couples can add their own poses to the scripts that they enact. The costumes and settings simultaneously limit, enable, and facilitate improvisations. Studios encourage their clients to improvise to make the performance personally meaningful. Finally, when the photos are produced,¹⁵ young couples can still exercise their editorial authority. They choose which photos go into their family album and which are left out or even discarded. The process of editing determines the final version of the gender project the couple presents to actual audiences (or potential, imagined audiences) and the building blocks of the imagined family gender genealogy. Cynthia told me that she had five sets of photos taken. One set was never mentioned or shown to anyone¹⁶ — she destroyed them, because she did not like the photos. “They are just not me,” was her reaction.

In her *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler theorizes the enactment of gender scripts as a process of “materialization” of the regulatory law of sex. She argues that during this process, the hegemonic law of sex is both reiterated and destabilized, because “it is by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such construction” (1993: 10). Furthermore, every formation requires and institutes its exclusions. It will “produce its remainder, its outside, what one might call its ‘unconscious’” (22). Consequently, possibilities for rematerialization and rearticulations are opened up by those alternative beings that inhabit outside the exclusionary matrix of sex. These outsiders produce the defining limit of the subject’s domain, haunt those boundaries, and open up possibilities for disruption and rearticulations. We can observe such disruption and “rematerialization” in improvisations or “parody performance” (Butler 1990) in the studio wedding photos. These subversive gender performances blur the boundary of proper gender codes, reveal the existence and persistent influence of what has been foreclosed or banished from the proper domain of sex, or its “unconscious” in Butler’s term. In the next section, I comment on examples of how this couple subverted assumed gender scripts in their performance, and analyze the “unconscious” these performances reveal.

15. Photos are delivered on CD. Studios also provide printing services, for an extra charge.

16. In this set of photos, she is wearing a Western-style formal evening dress.

The Negotiation, Improvisation and Subversion of Gender Scripts

In one of the photos (Figure 5) from the “ancient times,” Cynthia is pulling her husband’s ear with one hand and her other hand is on her hip. A mischievous smile is on her face. She told me that this pose was her improvisation. This is not something she simply made up, but is a parody of their everyday practice — sometimes she pulls her husband’s ears, and he is so used to this that his reaction in the photo is “very natural” (Cynthia Xu, personal communication). This pose subverts the preconceived ancient gender script, which requires a woman to be modest, submissive, dignified and respectful of the gender hierarchy. Cynthia’s pose and body language do not resemble those of a modest woman and she does not follow the protocols of behavior¹⁷ for a virtuous and respectful wife. By pulling her husband’s ear,¹⁸ she is challenging one of the three obediences — obedience to the husband after marriage. What she presents is an alternative version of femininity outside of the Confucian orthodox gender scripts.

The image of the shrewish wife has existed throughout Chinese history and has a contemporary incarnation. *Puofu*, the domineering wife, used to be the object of satire. She was ridiculed and mocked in popular tales and poems by famous literati.¹⁹ The image of an angry, jealous, usually old and ugly, shrewish wife served as a negative example to teach women about female virtue. However, in this posed portrait of the shrewish wife, the representation is rather positive. Cynthia is happy, young, attractive, and proud. Most importantly, this photo survived the editing process and is in the photo album. It is now incorporated into the canonical gender images that form part of the imagined family

17. For discussion of the protocols of behavior, see Barlow (1991).

18. This ear-pulling practice often exists between the one in the higher position in a hierarchy, towards the one who is in the lower rank, for example, between a teacher and student, or parent and child. It implies that someone is going to be given a lesson for wrongdoing. It also indicates the puller’s dominant, paternalistic position. There is an intimate aspect to this act as well. The mother who pulls her son’s ear indicates her right to educate and correct him for his own good. A wife who is pulling her husband’s ear is a typical representation of the domineering wife. The representation of such practice can often be seen in traditional Chinese Opera and contemporary Drama.

19. The term *hedong shihou* — the roar of the lioness from the east side of the River — which means a domineering wife in a temper, is derived from a poem written by Su Dongpo (alternate name Su Shi), a famous poet in the Song dynasty who used this expression to mock his friend’s shrewish wife.

gender genealogy and constitutes an important element in Cynthia's personal gender project. It conveys non-submission as not only acceptable but also attractive.



Figure 5. *Pulling ear*

Two kinds of “unconscious” emerge and become visible in this subversive performance. One is the shrewish wife tradition that exists in women’s lived reality but is condemned by and excluded from official gender prescriptions. This gender position is available to and exercised by women at certain age, class, and in certain social relations. The other resource is the Maoist gender discourse that contributes to the change of the representation and popular attitude towards the shrewish

wife. The politics of challenging authority fomented in the Cultural Revolution²⁰ is associated with radically questioning authority of any kind, including the gender hierarchy. With the overthrow of feudal tradition in the Maoist era, the traditional notion that man is superior to woman was challenged. Furthermore, the overpoliticization of everyday life during the Cultural Revolution often made the gender hierarchy give way to class hierarchy. Perceptions of proper femininity were also modified. Traditional feminine guidelines were regarded as feudal, petit-bourgeois attributes, not suitable for revolutionary women because “revolution is not a dinner party.”

Some alternative aspects of femininity that used to be regarded as deviant and undesirable were encouraged as desirable proletarian class characteristics. Women were encouraged to speak loudly, be aggressive, and adopt cruder body language. These attributes were seen as belonging to the laboring class and to revolutionary women: qualities needed in order to participate in class struggles and fight with revolutionary enemies. In this context, women’s aggressiveness was not stigmatized, but rather encouraged, at least in the official rhetoric. The Maoist gender ideology has now disappeared from public discourses. However, it is still embodied in many members of the Maoist gender cohort and persists in people’s perceptions, attitudes and behaviors in everyday gender practices. The Maoist gender cohort has carried its historical marks into the new era. Maoist gender ideology directly or indirectly influences children and students; the post-Mao gender cohort has been raised and educated by parents and teachers from the Maoist gender cohort.²¹

The ear-pulling photo disrupts the scripted representation of a harmonious and loving marital relationship dependent on the wife’s submissiveness and suggests the hidden power dynamics in heterogender relations. It also reveals the practices that are excluded from the official Confucian law of gender but inhabit the margins of its domain, and are vital in lived reality. Within the limited possibilities conditioned by the settings and costumes, Cynthia subverted the gender script by taking

20. See Lisa Rofel’s (1999) discussion on the politics of authority among the Cultural Revolution cohort.

21. I do not mean to essentialize each cohort as having fixed, unchanging qualities. Many members of the Maoist gender cohort have experienced gender identity reformations and may have radically changed their gender acts in the post-Mao era. My emphasis here is on the importance of the gender discourses received in the formative years when gender identity is established.

advantage of the space opened up by the studio performance to demonstrate the subversive possibilities a performer can exploit through unexpected behavior.



Figure 6. *Sitting on the husband's lap*

Another gender transgression is found in the Republican era set of photos. In one picture, Cynthia sits on her husband's lap, wearing a fitted, sleeveless, high-split *qipao*. This behavior seems plausible, but it is an improvised subversion of the gender script. Sitting on a husband's lap was not socially acceptable behavior for women in the Republican era, especially not for decent women from respectable families with social status. It would have been perceived as frivolous behavior, typical of a mistress, courtesan or concubine. However, this behavior seems appropriate in this set of photos, which presents the couple's relationship as modern and intimate, emphasizing its sexual dimension.

In the Republican era, the construction of *nuxing* emphasized women's sexual differences and tended to present women as objects of male desire. The settings and costumes contribute to this effect, since the *qipao* highlights the sexiness of the female body. It incites the performer to exhibit her body and display her sexual attractiveness. The open fan also draws viewers' attention to her body. It thus seems spontaneous for the performer to assume this flirtatious pose.

There are crucial factors which make this improvisation possible. The performer has to feel comfortable with her sexuality and confident enough to exhibit this sexuality, assuming that it is socially acceptable behavior able to be shown in her family album and assessed by others. Cynthia is a member of the post-Mao gender cohort and as such she grew up with discourses that affirm gender difference and sexuality. As a young and beautiful woman who is physically close to the ideal of the attractive woman as defined by mainstream discourses on sexuality, she is confident about her sexuality and able to enthusiastically embrace these discourses in which being sexy is an important dimension of gender identity.

While discourses on sexuality proliferate in contemporary China, the symbolic sign-system for such new images of femininity is still under development after decades of "undoing gender" in the Mao era. In order to express their newly recognized sexuality, many contemporary Chinese women use their imagination and creativity to engage in the construction of a sign-system to convey this sexuality. Since no language (in a broad sense) about sexuality is available from orthodox gender discourse for decent women, they have to appropriate marginalized representations of female sexuality, using language associated with sexualized women who live for men's sexual pleasure.

These photos demonstrate how the subversion of gender scripts is conditioned and enabled by the historical backgrounds represented in the photos, the social background in which the performances took place, and the performers' social status and gender practice in real life. While some improvisations are in tune with the expected scripts, others are disruptive. Furthermore, by modifying the scripts, these improvisations reveal the alternative and hidden scripts (or the unconscious) that disrupted them. In the case of the photo in Figure 6, the alternative practice comes from that of the marginalized group, sexualized women.

However, there are limitations to such subversions. The gender subversions described above were achieved by exploiting the intimacy of a heterosexual relationship. Moreover, this kind of subversion is probably available only to young and beautiful women. In the post-Mao era, the emphasis on sexual differences has facilitated the “beauty economy” [*meinu jinji*], meaning women can cash in on their looks. A combination of youth and beauty may allow a woman to temporarily transgress the conventional gender hierarchy and enjoy a more equal or even higher position in her relationships. However, a young, beautiful woman’s exercise of sexual power (as defined by patriarchal structures) is often accepted and tolerated because sexual power is a dwindling asset, time-limited, and available only to a few women. It is achieved through some possibilities that are only open to certain individuals, rather than through institutional and conceptual means. The changes it brought about are not systematic and fundamental and have limited potential to unsettle the broader gender structure or destroy the gender system. Furthermore, sexual power can only be exercised to a limited extent and often cannot be asserted on its own, but must be backed up by educational and economic status.

Gender, Cultural Identity, and China’s Modernity Projects

The gender scripts in these wedding photos are carefully selected and designed according to shared cultural conventions that organize gender projects in the post-Mao era. A wide range of historical and cultural references inform the settings for studio wedding photographs: the orthodox Confucian gender tradition, pre-revolutionary bourgeois femininities and masculinities, Maoist revolutionary gender ideology, and the post-Mao modern gender project. The specific combination of selected symbols constitutes a repertoire of gender styles belonging to a particular social group: well-educated, heterosexual, upper-middle-class Han Chinese.

The repertoire of gender styles pictured in the composition is class specific. However, the studios want to make it look as if they are available to everyone, and by doing so they create an illusion of a common origin in a rich, elite Chinese family which the clients can pretend to embody. These photographs not only construct an imagined personal gender genealogy, but also parallel a linear history of progress,

a narrative of China evolving from traditional to modern. They are not only about gender, but also about being Chinese.

This genealogy is closely related to other social projects such as the construction of Chinese history, of Chinese cultural identity, and of China's modernity project. In this narrative of Chinese history, certain cultural and historical moments are selected for remembrance, while others such as the Maoist era are left out. The photonarrative ignores the socialist history of China and returns to the pre-socialist past and the way of life that the socialist revolution destroyed. To understand the rationale behind this historical selectivity, the choice of settings has to be situated in the broader historical context, particularly in relation to the trend toward nostalgia in China in the 1990s.

Since the 1990s, a nostalgic sentiment has emerged in Chinese popular culture and has spread into various aspects of urban life. While the attraction of nostalgia is primarily due to the profound social changes which have occurred in China since the 1980s, different social groups have their own reasons for embracing nostalgia. The *zhijing* generation is nostalgic for their youthful years during the Cultural Revolution (Yang 2003). Older women workers recall their time as heroic socialist workers in the 1950s (Rofel 1999). Social groups disadvantaged by increasing inequality long for the egalitarianism of the Maoist period. Rural people are nostalgic for the mass political campaigns during the Maoist period which were an effective means of curbing corruption (O'Brien and Li 1993, 1999). The offspring of those who were deprived of property and social status by the socialist revolution reminisce about their lost family glory before the revolution. The emerging bourgeoisie and middle class search through stories of the materialism and sophistication of old Shanghai for a cultural reference for their new consumer lifestyles.

Studio wedding photos represent a nostalgia which belongs to the post-Mao gender cohort who grew up with post-Mao gender discourses emphasizing gender differences. As the earlier analysis of Cynthia's wedding photos demonstrated, the historical and cultural gender models that constitute the major resources for this particular post-Mao project are the feudal and imperial, the bourgeois West, and the colonial hybrid. These references were criticized and destroyed by the socialist revolution but are now being revived and enlisted as cultural capital. This post-Mao gender project is a crucial part of the modernity project in post-

Mao China. It aims to construct modern femininities and masculinities, which, in contrast to the revolutionary behavior of their parents, redeems Chinese traditions. This cohort wants to pursue the dream of wealth and make China an advanced (westernized) country with a modern (Western) lifestyle.

In wedding photos, couples can redeem the past that was interrupted by the Maoist revolutionary project. By playing roles in these wedding photos, couples bridge the discontinuity that the revolution produced and reinvigorate an effaced history. However, this nostalgia for lives they have not experienced, for an imaginary elite past, is actually a projection of their ideal dream of the future. The nostalgia is paradoxically driven by the desire for modernity, for renewal. History is recollected for inspiration and as a resource to construct a “modern” future. As Dai Jinhua (2000) points out in discussing the nostalgia trend, the south and especially colonial Shanghai have been “discovered” as privileged sites for remembrance. In turning back to a perceived hybrid, bourgeois urban culture that existed before the socialist revolution, young people find a delicacy, luxury, beauty, antiquity, and style which can be reappropriated for the construction of a new modern dream.

Significantly, in light of the pursuit of modernity, there is no wedding costume of the minorities in China in these wedding photos. Even though images of wedding costumes from minority groups are printed on postcards and sold in tourist places, these costumes are regarded as backward in the imagination of a modern China. They cannot be considered part of China’s future project. As mentioned earlier, customers reject the Japanese kimono, because wearing a kimono for a wedding is not acceptable for a Chinese woman. However, the same attitude does not apply to wearing a Western white dress and tuxedo. These are regarded as part of a universal contemporary wedding costume rather than as belonging to a certain race or ethnic group. In this narrative, Western is equated with modern, and this attire is therefore desirable.

The inclusion of traditional Chinese costumes in the wedding photograph repertoire manifests a contemporary Chinese cultural identity construction project that attempts to reconcile the perceived dichotomy of Chinese/traditional vs. Western/modern. Present day wedding photography appears to suggest a possibility of being both Chinese and modern. However, it is clear that the traditional images

are purely decorative, for fun,²² while the Westernized images are part of a scenario which now appears more “real.”

The following story from Cynthia demonstrates the efforts in solving the dilemma of being both Chinese and modern, and how a personal gender project is tangled with the project of Chinese cultural identity construction. In my personal communication with her, Cynthia explained to me how she had chosen the Chinese costumes in these photos. She said she had been inclined towards total westernization when she lived in China. After she went to Canada and met people from the West and Chinese people from Taiwan, she felt she was not sufficiently Chinese and feminine because she did not know about or embody Chinese tradition. From then on, she started to learn about Chinese culture and how to be more feminine.

Cynthia's cultural surrender and internal exile strategy could not sustain her identity claim when as a copy of the West she encountered the original. Her encounter with female Taiwanese Chinese students²³ made her feel that she lacked the modesty and delicacy of traditional Chinese femininity because of her ongoing embodiment of the Maoist gender project. When she talked with Chinese studies scholars and graduate students studying about China, she found that her everyday Chineseness was not valid either. Her Chinese cultural identity was facing a crisis. In order to come to terms with the original West, she needed a solid foundation for a self-referential identity. She needed a culture whose superiority could support her confrontation with Western culture. Resorting to a perceived original Chineseness became her strategy.

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22. Bonnie Adrian (2002) made a similar observation in her study of the bridal industry in Taiwan, stating that most of the young couples dress in Chinese costumes for fun, not because they value Chinese traditions. They sometimes strike irreverent poses in them. They may be doing so to make fun of old China and old approaches to marriage.
 23. Mainland China experienced a period of radical rejection of Chinese tradition, especially Confucianism, during the Cultural Revolution when many traditional Chinese ideas, customs, and practices were criticized and disappeared from daily life. Whereas Confucianism is still the dominant ideology under the Nationalist government rule in Taiwan, Taiwan also has a longer history of exposure to Western influence because of the close relationship between the United States and Taiwan. Taiwanese are thus perceived as both preserving more Chinese tradition and are more sophisticated in adopting Western culture.

In fact it is not Chineseness, femininity or Chinese tradition that Cynthia lacks. What she lacks is the kind of Chinese Otherness assumed by a Western perspective. She also lacks certain aspects of femininity associated with a Chinese patriarchal tradition and the tradition of high culture. The image of a traditional Chinese woman exoticized and eroticized by the gaze of the Western male spectator is readily available for appropriation by Cynthia. Combining the satisfaction of global consumerism, discourses on Chinese women's traditional virtue, and reform era discourses of sexuality in China, this image of Chinese woman is produced as the ethnic and erotic Other by the nostalgic trend in New Chinese Cinema (Dai 1995) and soap opera (Lu 2000) for the global market and the Western and male gaze.²⁴

The gender project at the public/collective level has to be interpreted, negotiated, and enacted through private/individual expression. Each individual constructs her own variation of this particular gender project, based on her social location along the axes of gender, race/ethnicity, class, and age. The gender project may have a shared structure to a certain extent, but its individual manifestations are diverse. It is hegemonic but also subject to negotiation, challenge and subversion in the process of its materialization and reiteration. The sample studio wedding photography of Cynthia can be understood as an individual manifestation of the post-Mao gender project. Cynthia's construction of her own gender project in her wedding photos aims to compensate for what she thought was missing. The key elements in her personal gender project — the traditional Chinese, the Western/modern, and the bourgeois characterize a particular post-Mao agenda. However, as this article demonstrates, those who have been excluded from such a project assumed a "troubled return" (Butler 1993: 23). The unconscious emerged to the surface to rearticulate itself and disrupted the symbolic horizon of the post-Mao gender project.

The post-Mao gender project is carried out under the haunting shadow of Maoist gender ideology and through cross-cultural negotiations with the Western gaze. It is a product of its specific social

24. When we talked about her photos, Cynthia kept referring to the "late imperial" set of photos (as I called it) as the "Da hong denglong gaogao gua" costume set. "Da hong denlong gaogao gua" [Raising High the Red Lantern] is a film directed by Zhang Yimou in the 1990s. It can be regarded as a representative work of the New Chinese Cinema.

historical context, historical sedimentation, and cross-cultural negotiations. However, the gender project discussed in this article is not only about gender. Its representation of femininity, female sexuality, and culture reveals its interconnections with the construction of Chinese cultural identity and China's modernity project. Through this gender project a narrative of Chinese history is constructed. This history of China's progress to modernity "forgets" the Maoist period and redeems the pre-revolutionary memory. The gender project represented in studio wedding photography is shaped by China's desire to catch up to the West and become modern, and constitutes an important part of China's modernity project. Furthermore, this gender project is carried out with an acute awareness of the Western gaze as the West intrudes in an era of globalization, and is linked with the construction of Chinese cultural identity.

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