

Even in China Boy Meets Girl—They Wed

Land of New and Ancient Marriage Rites

By JOHN POWELL

Shanghai, China. THERE is no place in the world where the institution of marriage has a wider range or greater variety of expression than in the republic of China, where the dense population, consisting of some 200,000,000 males and an equal number of females, reside in more or less constant juxtaposition.

From the ultramodern system of "mass-marriage," or the joining of dozens of couples at one time under official auspices in the occluded ports, the marriage custom varies to the most primitive forms, including "spirit" marriages in backward interior communities.

In Canton several years ago there was a marriage in a peasant family where a daughter was wedded to a tree, the superstitious parents thinking that the spirit of the bridegroom, who had died prior to the time set for his marriage to their daughter, had taken up its permanent residence in a tree which was standing in the yard. The widow was expected to refrain from another marriage and to remain virtuous for the remainder of her life.

Another interesting spirit marriage custom still prevails in the Tsangchow district of Hopei province, according to reports of missionaries residing in that area. Here, according to the report, it was not unusual for parents whose son had died in infancy, or any time before a marriage could be arranged, to contract a spirit marriage with a daughter of another family who had died in infancy.

There is an important reason for this strange custom of spirit marriages. It is the aversion to having unmarried members of the family buried in the family burial ground. Negotiations between two families, one having a deceased son and the other a deceased daughter, often extend over a considerable period and are accompanied by realistic formalities which usually take place at regular weddings.

In the cases of spirit marriages, however, the wedding is immediately followed by two funerals, wherein the bodies of the deceased are taken to the family burial ground of the boy's parents and interred in formal fashion with the usual accompaniments, including a band to supply appropriate melodies.

In the modernized cities, such as Shanghai, Canton, Nanking, the new capital, and other places where occidental ideas and customs now prevail, the institutions of courtship and marriage—and also divorce—do not greatly differ from practice in America and Europe. Conservative Chinese of the interior rural districts and villages, however, change slowly and habits of ancient times still prevail.

An English missionary residing at Tsingkiangpu, about 250 miles north of Shanghai, recently told of

a matrimonial mixup that was not without its humorous features. A bride who was being transported in ancient manner in a covered sedan chair to the home of her husband stopped at a wayside teahouse to warm her hands and feet as the weather was bitterly cold. While she was in the teahouse another marriage procession came by and the second bride also entered the teahouse. After some minutes the parties started out again, but as the sedan chairs were alike, the brides by mistake got in the wrong chairs. Three days later, when the families of the brides were invited to the homes of the new husbands for a feast, there was general consternation when it was discovered that the brides were not their own daughters. The mystery finally was solved when the chair bearers explained the stop at the teahouse. Mutual friends were called in, and after considerable discussion it was decided to adopt a common-sense solution and let the marriages stand.



Little girls precede the brides in a procession before the most recent mass marriage in Canton. Bridesgrooms at left.

These incidents resulted from what is now termed old-style marriages, wherein the arrangements were made by parents, who utilized the services of professional go-betweens, geomancers, and fortune tellers. Although surrounded by much folderol, this type of mating was a sort of business transaction between the parents of the principals, neither of whom had ever seen the other and neither being consulted about the desirability of the match.

Matchmaking under the old arrangement must have provided employment for a considerable number of persons, because all parents with marriageable sons and daughters employed one or more go-betweens or matchmakers, who shopped about town or in neighboring towns for desirable mates.

Courtship and marriage under the old system not only were expensive but filled with anxieties for both parties to the match. It often happened that after all negotiations had been completed by the go-betweens some fortune teller would forbid the marriage on the ground that the bridegroom had been born in the year of the lamb while the bride had been born in the year of the lion, thus making the marriage impossible, because the "lion" bride would be certain to devour the "lamb" husband, or at least make his life unbearable.

According to "The Book of History of the Classics," the Chinese race in mythological times lived promiscuously, children knowing their mothers but not their fathers. Later came the submission of one woman or women to one man, resulting in parental authority. The first laws dealing with marriage were enacted in the Hsia and Yin dynasties. These permitted marriage between members of the same clan; but the later Chou dynasty was the first to forbid marriages between persons having the same surname. In the feudal period there were laws forbidding marriage with five kinds of women: (1) Daughter of a rebellious house; (2) daughter of a disorderly house; (3) daughter of a house producing criminals; (4) daughter of a house having members afflicted with leprosy or other incurable disease; (5) daughter who had lost her father and elder brother. Marriage was forbidden during the three years



Mass weddings have become popular in westernized cities of China—it's mainly a matter of low cost. Here are the bridal couples and a 133-year-old witness of China's first mass wedding, solemnized in Hangchow. (Photos from Powell.)

bride's dowry, trousseau, and furniture, together with gifts from relatives and friends, were carried to the bridegroom's house. In the Shanghai district it often was customary to send along two live geese.

On the eve of the wedding the bride was expected to put up her hair, try on her bridal garments, light incense before the family ancestral tablets, and kneel before

so tight as to prevent their normal growth.

Later the two proceeded separately to a reception room, where they stood before the bridegroom's ancestral tablets, and after oblation to the gods and each other they drank a mixture of wine and honey from goblets tied together with red silk thread, then exchanged cups and drank again. Then followed a feast, at which the bride was not expected to eat. It was here that her veil was lifted, permitting relatives, friends, and the public to criticize her appearance and make all types of jokes, usually unprintable. On the third day the couple visited the bride's family, where they also worshiped at the ancestral tablets. After the tenth day the bride could visit her parents alone.

Child betrothals were common in the Manchu regime, but when the republic was established (1911) a law was passed forbidding mar-

riages in red silk jackets and skirts, and the sedan chair would be altogether too dangerous for Shanghai's congested traffic. Instead a modern American automobile serves the purpose with a few ribbons and garlands of flowers, indicating its objective. Also there are no more week-long celebrations with guests occupying themselves in excessive eating and drinking. Today one banquet usually suffices. Also today the bride dresses in a standard wedding gown, wears a veil, carries a bouquet, and is attended by bridesmaids and flower girls.

The institution of "mass marriage" was invented to cut down the excessively high cost of marriage, which worked a hardship on the rank and file. Popularity of the mass-wedding idea, which reduces the cost of marriages to a minimum (average about \$6 a couple), is shown by the fact that 1,087 couples were married at Shanghai alone in 1936. Thirteen such public ceremonies have been held.

Should China ever succeed in obtaining full sovereignty, thus making her divorce laws legal for all nationalities, it probably would be necessary for trans-Pacific steamers to greatly increase their services. The reason is that China apparently has outdone Reno, Mexico City, and Paris for simplicity of divorce.

Adultery, previously illegal for

tates and usually such claims are allowed by the courts. Claims of concubines—some eighteen of them—belonging to a famous North China general named Marshal Chang Chung-chang kept the native courts of Tientsin busy for several years.

Recently there was a sensation in educational circles at Shanghai when Dr. Tai Shuan-chiu, dean of the school of education of Great China university, obtained a divorce from his wife on the ground that she refused to wear native woven cloth and insisted upon buying imported materials. It de-



These two were wedded in grand occidental style in a Shanghai hotel.

veloped he had previously divorced the same wife on similar grounds a year previously, but had remarried her upon her promise to wear native materials. Later the professor announced he had found the "girl of his dreams," a student in the university, who had promised to wear dresses made of native rather than imported fabrics.

It is not infrequent in Shanghai that advertisements appear in the papers announcing that so-and-so, son or daughter of so-and-so, refused to marry the person selected by the parents and declared his (or her) intention of marrying the person of his choice, evidence that the new "boy meets girl" system has invaded China and is displacing the ancient "sight and unseen" matrimonial methods of the ancestors.



Dr. Tai Shuan-chiu, Shanghai educator, and his wife, whom he twice divorced because she insisted upon wearing garments made of imported fabrics.



A two-line parade of brides and bridesmaids at the recent Canton mass wedding.

of mourning, and widows were obliged to remain single. The Manchu dynasty, which preceded the present republican regime, passed laws providing that legal betrothals could be arranged by the paternal grandparents of the couple; parents of the couple; paternal uncle of the father and his wife; paternal aunt, sister of the father; eldest brother; eldest sister; maternal grandparents.

Severe penalties were exacted in the event the go-betweens misrepresented the bride or bridegroom; hence the marriage contract arranged by the go-between and ultimately signed by the respective parents referred in detail to any blemishes or physical infirmities of the bride or bridegroom, their ages, if either had been born of a concubine, and if either had been adopted. If even a description was found to be fraudulent the marriage could be annulled.

There were three essential conditions to a marriage—a contract signed by the parents or guardian; acceptance of wedding gifts by the bride's family; bringing of the bride to the bridegroom's house. After the go-betweens had made the preliminary arrangements it was then customary for the boy's parents to make a formal offer of marriage to the bride's parents, which constituted the marriage contract. Then followed a visit to the geomancer or fortune teller to select a lucky day. Fees were in proportion to the wealth and social (official) position of the respective families; hence an inadequate fee might result in an unfavorable decision by the fortune teller.

A month before the marriage it was customary for the bridegroom's family to send to the bride's family the material for the bride's dress, presents of money, silks, wines, and cakes of ceremony. A few days prior to the marriage date the

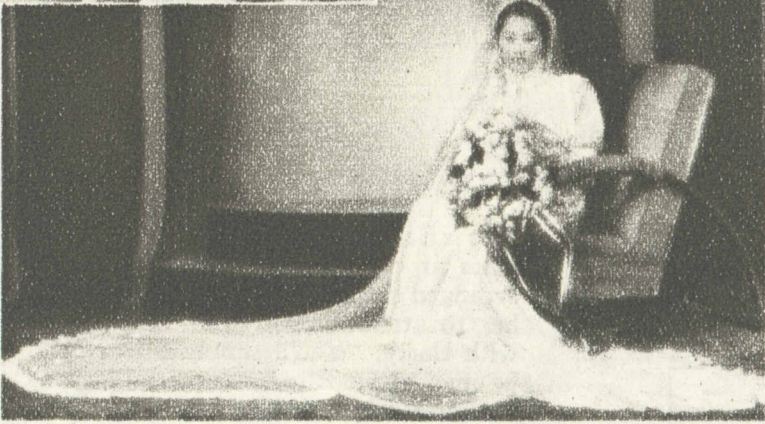
her parents, grandparents, and senior relatives.

The ritual of the wedding day had to be strictly observed, even to the tunes to be played by the attending musicians while the bride was bathing and donning her marriage clothes, the outer garments invariably being red, with embroidered dragons. A heavy veil completely covered her face and head. A friend of the bridegroom bearing a letter, regarded as a marriage certificate, arrived to escort the bride to the home of the bridegroom. Firecrackers were set off as she left the door of her home and entered the sedan chair. All members of the family wept. The bride's brothers walked beside the chair, which always was covered with embroidered red cloth.

There were more firecrackers upon the arrival of the procession at the bridegroom's house. The chair was carried directly into the reception room, where a small boy lifted the covering and invited the bride to descend, meanwhile holding a mirror in front of the bride in order that she might inspect herself. The bride was then escorted to her room, where she sat by the side of the bridegroom on the edge of the bed, thus permitting the bridegroom for the first time to look upon the face of his beloved. It was his privilege to unfasten the girdle which she had worn from childhood about her breasts, often



Marching in couples, the brides and bridesmaids head for the ceremonial stage.



Modern China turns them out thus. A bride and bridegroom who were wedded in a Christian church.

riage before the age of 18 for men and 16 for women.

While much modification of ancient customs occurred after the 1911 revolution, which destroyed the Manchu dynasty, most drastic changes followed the Nationalist revolution of 1927.

In the modernized ports and cities, such as Shanghai, Canton, and Nanking, it now has become a case of the traditional four stages—boy meets girl, boy falls in love with girl, boy courts girl, and boy gets girl—in this case the boy and girl may be students in the same co-educational college or university.

The present-day Nationalist leaders, particularly Gen. Chiang Kai-shek and his wife, the former Meiling Soong, Wellesley graduate, have done much to modernize the marriage customs of ancient China. No longer does the bride dress

women only, is now illegal for both sexes, the result of a dramatic legal battle before the legislative Yuan in Nanking by the Chinese women's clubs. Polygamy also is illegal and, with adultery, constitutes valid grounds for divorce.

The law of China is ominously silent on the subject of concubinage. The reason for this significant omission is that the practice is quite general among the wealthier classes. One well known Chinese merchant, high official of a chamber of commerce at Shanghai, is said to have 35 children resulting from one wife and a half dozen concubines.

While the subject of concubinage is ignored in the civil code, this does not mean that concubines and their children have no legal status. Cases frequently come up in the courts involving claims of concubines and their children for participation in the division of es-



A college romance in western manner. Chinan university boy and girl who became husband and wife.