



Capturing happiness

Contemporary Bridal photography in Taiwan

A Master's Thesis for the Degree "Master of Arts
(Two Years) in Visual Culture

By

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Abstract

Taiwanese bridal photography is a unique practice with the goal to produce images of fantasy styles ahead of the wedding. Chosen images are displayed at the wedding banquet for the guests to admire and later used as decoration in the house of newlyweds. This visual phenomenon is interesting in that people actively take part in the creation and consumption of visual commodity and it is connected to marriage, a rite of passage. From the cultural perspective, this bridal photography, dominated by the photo studios, even reversed the passive role of recording to actively changing the wedding culture in Taiwan. By combining services like wedding planning and honeymoon travel package, wedding industry is a combination of artistic work and profitable business.

This thesis takes a deeper look into bridal images created in the 21st century and attempts to analyze the meaning by applying semiotic analysis to specific images. Aesthetically and practically this kind of image is very different from the documentary tradition of wedding photography. Starting with an introduction of the traditional approach, this analysis takes into consideration the styles of the images and tries to find out the relation between signifiers in the images and the signified fantasy, and attempts to interpret the visuality in such bridal photography.

Another aspect of the discussion concerns the ways in which people look and perceive these images, as meanings are interpreted by people when they look at the images, also considered in this thesis is the change brought by digitization of image and distribution over the Internet.

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Introduction:

Program Diagnosis

Wedding and its related business industries is an important topic in the discussion of culture throughout the world. Wedding, as a rite of passage, has been associated with photography since very early times. As photography is considered a tool for memory and preserving precious moments in life, it has been used as the tool for documentary purpose with the goal to record the events as they happened. Yet in Taiwanese weddings, the photography is separated in two different phases. In addition to having a photographer present at the wedding day doing documentary photos, there is a unique practice of bridal photography that is done approximately two months prior to the wedding and in a style closer to staged, fashion approach of photography. The bridal photography does not only involve a photographer taking pictures of the wedding couple. It is a service industry requiring a team including a make-up artist, a lighting technician and suppliers for costumes and gowns for the shooting. Such teamwork flourished to become a strong influence even for the wedding ceremony itself. This industry of bridal photography started in the 1970s¹ and eventually evolved away from the simply act of taking pictures as memoir of personal life. It combines the style of fashion photography and the influence from foreign visual cultures² and can be described as a visual commodity of fantasy.

This phenomenon proliferated to the entire eastern Asian region and even North America where many people of Chinese origin resides.³ This thesis will focus on the analysis and discussion of bridal photography images in Taiwan.

¹ Yu-in Li, 'Preparing the bride- The history of Taiwanese Bridal industry', in *Feng Chia Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* Vol.8, 2004. Taichung, Taiwan p.191.

² For example, Japanese manga books since 1970s and Hollywood movies, as well as Japanese/Korean TV series broadcasted since 2000 over satellite channels.

³ Hsio-Oh Chen, *Take the Example of "Bridal Photography Industry" for discussing the key success factors in industrialization of Cultural and Creative Industries*, Kaohsiung, Taiwan, 2008, p.90.

Relevance of the work

As the origin of the field of visual culture, art history in the western tradition, developed mainly in relation to European works, the visual presentation and identity in Asian context, including Taiwan, is relatively less discussed in Visual Culture studies.

While some research regarding this bridal photography industry in Taiwan has been done from sociological and ethnographical perspectives, there are no current existing papers that focus on the analysis of the bridal image. To comprehend the wedding visual culture in Taiwan, it is necessary to have a good understanding of the bridal images which play a role in changing the wedding tradition and ceremony.

Question, research goals, hypothesis

The bridal photograph has been developed into a huge industry in Taiwan over the past thirty years. But what is included in the bridal images? What are the key concepts or the mentality that affects the style? What does the visuality of the image mean for the couple and other people, when it has very little connection to reality?

My research takes up a hypothesis, a view of the bridal photography as a localization and adaptation of influences from Hollywood movie, fantasy and fairy tales. While the images (or more precisely, the photographers) imitate movie posters/portrait paintings, it is not a pure copy or import of western visual culture. It is actually a mixture and adaptation of western appearance with Taiwanese creativity underneath. The image presents the beauty of the bride and even idealizes her beauty

by makeup and retouching on the images, yet it by no means objectifies the bride. The main attraction is the imagination inspired by the photography, and the pictures function as a tool of enhanced memory. Such enhanced memories commemorate the event of wedding in a symbolic way and become personalized keepsakes, because while life in reality is imperfect and memory deteriorates with time, the perfect pictures will not degrade and always be evidence of the dream. This dream factor turned the pictures into valuable items for the wedding couples and their families.

I intend to discuss the above issues by studying visual cues in the image. As for the part of dream factor, I will explore it with the help of Ernst Bloch's articles about hope⁴.

My hypothesis is that bridal photography can be described as the provision of a dramatic experience, which does not simply captures happiness, but rather captures the happiness that is generated by the shooting process. There is a *dream factor* in bridal photography, since the shooting of bridal photography is a staged presentation comparable to film industry and that wedding photography is a kind of play in which the couple participates.

Theories and methods

I intend to apply semiotic analysis to the images. Semiotic analysis has been widely used in studies for both verbal and non-verbal media, namely text, music and photography. Its focus on signs and the construction of meaning in specific context is well suited for the purpose of this paper. Semiotics “foregrounds and problematizes the process of representation”⁵ Originally developed for analyzing texts with

⁴ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Volume one. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986

⁵ Daniel Chandler, *Semiotic: the Basics*, Routledge, Oxon, 2007, p.10

language code systems, the method can be applied to find out the power of image as text⁶ and how meaning is constructed. In later development, 'social semiotics' placed the focus on cultural experience and understanding, which helped the context specific study of images. While Roland Barthes brought up the relation between a photograph and its accompanying caption text⁷, it is worth noting that bridal photography in Taiwan is presented without any caption text. Hence the analysis of message contained in the images has to depend on photographic codes and cultural conventions.

The main content of the thesis is analysis of bridal photography image. I hope to read out deeper level of interpretation of such image production. My image analysis will be focused on the signs constructed within a specific cultural context. At the same time the settings in which these images are used and displayed will also be discussed, since the meaning of the image is defined and composed not only of its compositional content but also the displaying and usage, its role in the actual wedding ceremony. How do the pictures invite people to look at the couple? Do the pictures connect the private life to the public (guests in wedding banquet)? What kind of perspective and viewing angle do the pictures offer? This thesis aims to try and answer some of these questions. The images of Taiwanese bridal images analyzed in this thesis are all selected from the wedding portal website verywed.com⁸, while one Swedish wedding photo from early 20th century is provided by Eva Tullgren from her private collection.

⁶ Liz Wells, 'Introduction to the part of codes and rhetoric' in *Photography Reader*, Liz Wells (ed.) Routledge, London 2003, p.110.

⁷ Roland Barthes, 'Rhetorics of the Image' in *Photography Reader*, Liz Wells (ed.) Routledge, London 2003, p.114-125

⁸ This website serves as a discussion forum and provides information for services including photographers, banquet halls, and travel agencies.

State of current research/sources and literature

Several Chinese language theses on the topic of wedding photography have been published, but the majority of them focused on sociological or anthropological aspects or analyzing cultural trends⁹ while another focused on the business management aspect of the bridal photography salon.¹⁰ The book *Framing the bride* written by anthropologist Bonnie Adrian takes great effort in making a detailed ethnography surrounding the bride and described the wedding custom and tradition in Taiwan¹¹. Yet the existing research works did not explore or analysis the images in detail. Images are included in the books or theses for the purpose of illustration only; they are not really in the center of the analysis. Hence this thesis intends to supplement the blank area by analyzing the actual photography and the visual signifiers in the pictures.

⁹ For example, Li, 2004, *A Research on the Photographical representaiton from Consumer's collective Imaginary of Bridal industries in Taiwan.*, Chia-Yi, Taiwan, 2008.

¹⁰ Chen, 2008.

¹¹ Bonnie Adrian, *Framing the bride : globalizing beauty and romance in Taiwan's bridal industry.* University of California Press, Berkeley, 2003.

Chapter 1 Historical Background

The classical Tradition

Wedding photography has been a part of photography history for a long time. As early as 1854, Roger Fenton was commissioned to commemorate the event of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's marriage (which took place fourteen years earlier) with photographs of the couple in their wedding clothes.¹² In early times photography equipment was heavy and requires long exposure time, hence the activity of taking memorial photos usually took place in a fixed location. Also because it was expensive, only a few people could afford to have these photos taken. This did not change for a long time.

Over time the act of taking wedding photography changed for several reasons. The advancement of photography equipments reduced the size and weight of cameras, so that they were more portable and the time needed for the exposure was also shortened.¹³ With newer cameras, it was finally possible to take the camera out of the studio and into the event of wedding, be it the church or outdoor gardens. Once getting out of the studio, wedding photography became livelier with action. While the pace of photo-making gets faster, the basic motive has not changed that much. Glen Johnson suggests that wedding photographers are privileged to be the witness and historian of one of the big four days in life (the four days are birth, marriage, birth of first child, and death)¹⁴. Such faithful recording of the event from a historical approach is often considered a treasure for the couple and is able to trigger deep emotions when looked upon many years later. Wedding photography, like the other

¹² Robin Lenman 'wedding photographs' from *The Oxford Companion to the Photograph*. Robin Lenman (ed.)Oxford University Press 2005. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t207.e1624>> (March 30, 2010)

¹³ Robert Hirsch, *Seizing the Light: A history of photography*, McGraw Hill, 2000, p.172.

¹⁴ Glen Johnson, *Digital wedding photography*, Wiley, 2006 p.6.

three occasions mentioned above, has the character of ritual social representation¹⁵ and hence much deeper connection to personal life than commercial/advertisement photography.

One branch of development in wedding photography turned out to be wedding documentary photos, which focuses on photographic record of the details and actual scenes on the wedding day. This is also called wedding photojournalism, although it is not for media purpose and the term 'photojournalism' is borrowed here to indicate the truthfulness of this approach. According to the definition by Wedding Photojournalist Association¹⁶, wedding photojournalism follows the rule of "quietly capturing the real moments as they happen for the bride and groom, to tell the story of the wedding day, not dictate it for the couple."¹⁷ This concept is the opposite to what will be discussed mainly in this thesis, staged bridal images.

The Taiwanese Tradition

According to Yu-in Li, the formation of wedding photography in Taiwan started around the 1970s,¹⁸ for several reasons. The first one being the economic boom in Taiwan, providing people with enough spare money to spend on ceremonial consumption, and the second is the introduction of color films that came in rolls¹⁹. In the past, the photographer was also the chemist that was responsible for developing the films and performing the retouching and enlargement in house. Yet the introduction of color films changed the game because the developing of color

¹⁵ Paul Frosh, *The Image Factory: consumer culture, photography and the visual content industry*, Berg, Oxford, 2003, p.92.

¹⁶ This association is based in USA with member photographers around the world, and with an annual membership fee of 300 USD.

¹⁷ www.wpja.com (May 10, 2010)

¹⁸ Li., 2004, p.189.

¹⁹ Li., 2004, p.184.

films needed more complicated equipments and required more time than before, so that the developing of film was separated from the studios. Centralized developing companies took the job from photographers, allowing photographers to focus on refining the composition and creating new styles, to experiment on new possibilities.

The birth of bridal photography

The separation of developing from shooting forecasted the trend of assembly-line style production in the wedding photography.

By the late 1970s the separation of bridal photography and wedding shoots did not occur yet. It was until around late 1980s, under the initiation of photo studios' effort to reinvent the business, people bought the idea of having photos done prior to the wedding²⁰. Such initiation by the studios has its reasons: traditionally people believed that the wedding dress should be worn by the bride only once, otherwise it is considered unlucky²¹. Hence the photo can be only taken on the wedding day but there were many couples getting married during the popular wedding weekends²², and photo studios have very limited space. Thus it became difficult to manage both for the couple and for the photographer.

From the photographer's perspective, if the couples are under time pressure, then it will be very difficult to create natural and happy-looking pictures for them, and even the amount of photograph taken will be limited, thus the profit generated will also be limited.

With some efforts, the photo studios came up with the idea of convincing people

²⁰ Li, p.198.

²¹ Chen, p.59.

²² Traditionally people in Taiwan tend to follow the farmers' (lunar) calendar (農曆), which states that certain days are suitable for marriage, thus there are significantly more couples getting married on those weekends.

to take pictures with different dress one or two months before the wedding. They suggested that by changing different dresses, the bride can avoid the problem of wearing that white dress twice and at the same time attain visual diversity in the pictures. This way, the time of shooting does not have to be on the wedding day and can be easily scheduled to avoid conflict in the studio.

Emotionally, as the photo-shooting session is separated from the stressful wedding day, the couples could have the possibility to relax and focus on being the subject of photo, thus creating more and better pictures than before. This was a fundamental change to the actual content of pictures and the decisive separation of 'wedding photography' and 'bridal photography'. In the traditional sense people take the wedding photography at the studio with family members in the picture, with the aim to witness that the event took place. This kind of wedding picture did not contain lively expression, and people were mostly looking serious in the picture, partly due to the hassles of the wedding day. In other words, this kind of photo was 'necessary on the to-do list' rather than 'enjoyable experience'

Once separated from the wedding day to-do list, the meaning and intended purpose of the new genre of bridal pictures changed radically. It was surely still a kind of memory, still related to (and caused by) the wedding. As the shooting was cut away from the wedding day rush, the couples are now in the center of their own pictures (instead of appearing in a family group photo). The production of the photographs became event of its own, with the idea of creating interesting pictures, not just recording the big day. Since the time allocated for shooting the bridal photography now extends to one entire day, the photo studios encouraged (or more precisely, lured) the couples to try out more different compositions, changing between different dresses and backgrounds. Hence the bridal photography no longer records just what happened. It reversed the passive role of photography to the leading

role, to create images that do not conform to real life and then capture the happiness of the performing couple.

Evolution of bridal photography

The next step of development in the bridal photography was the integration of services. Traditionally, the brides would go to hair salons or stylists to do the hair and makeup before they head to the photo studio for a shooting session on the wedding day. They spend a large amount of time going back and forth between different locations and it became obvious for the photo studios that they could attract more customers by providing integrated services, from make-up to the rental of gown, and photography, all done in one shop. It was a new concept and achieved phenomenal success in the 1980s. The couples went through the process, which included first the make up artist and then several indoor shooting studios in the salon, each studio with a photographer and an assistant. This resembled assembly line production and the couples were transferred between studios and different photographers like cars in production line, which was efficient but did not feel very personal.

The next step is personalized service, which began in the 1990s and continues to this day.²³ From the discussion before signing the contract, the salons would assign a salesperson and a photographer for the couple, and on the shooting day they will only work with that one couple. This made bridal photography closer to a service industry and was the key to the success it has achieved today.

²³ Li, p.203.

Chapter 2 What is in the picture?

2.1 Wedding photography in a traditional sense



Figure 1 Carl Signefeldt, ca.1913,

Malmö, Sweden²⁴

Figure 1 shows the classical style of wedding photography, where the couple are included in the photo with a painted background. Instead of looking at each other, the gaze of the couple is fixed at the camera, and creating an intra-diegetic look²⁵ with the people who looks at this picture. There are no dramatic effects or costumes other

²⁴ Image Courtesy: Eva Tullgren, private collection.

²⁵ Victor Burgin, 'Looking at photographs' in Liz Wells, (ed.) *The photography reader*, Routledge, 2003 p.134.

than the wedding tuxedo and gown, the only props in the picture is the flower bouquet held by the bride.. The picture is printed on a hard paper with the name of the photo studio. There are two other photos that were preserved along with this one, both of which are group photos of the entire family. While not fancy, the picture did fulfil the function of commemorating the event of wedding, and in the picture the facial expression is serious without smile, the relationship is indicated by gown and physical closeness of the couple. In the analysis of romantic pictures, Frosh indicated that “physical intimacy is the very vehicle through which the coalescence of minds and selves is materialized and conveyed”.²⁶ Figure 1 is not a romantic picture, and not suggestive of a fantasy or fairy tale story, it was done as record and memory.

The time of the photo was written on the back of the photo. If judged by the visual cue in the photo, it can only be vaguely dated to early 20th century by hints of hairstyle and moustache. An early wedding photo in Taiwan would have looked similar, although the tuxedo and gown would have been different. This picture is chosen as an example of early wedding photography.

2.2 Nostalgic costume

About ninety years later than Figure 1, the photography of wedding in Taiwan has evolved to include different styles and a different purpose. Starting from this section, a few bridal photographs from the 21st century are analyzed from different angles.

²⁶ Frosh, p.124.



Figure.2 Classic Chinese *qi*-style dress (旗袍) for the bride and *ma-gua* (馬褂) coat for the groom, from 2010.²⁷

The theme in Figure 2 is one of the classic dress styles that resemble the early 20th century typical Shanghai upper-class setting, when women wore the traditional *qi*-style dress with modern earrings and men would wear *ma-gua* with a contemporary haircut. This kind of dress style became outdated after 1940-50s, and appears mostly in TV-drama nowadays. Although *qi*-dress are still treasured by some upper class women, it is not practical for daily wear since it requires intensive tailor work to produce, must be custom-made to fit and restricts the mobility of the body.

It is common to include several photos featuring nostalgic feelings in the bridal album. Such style may also include the classical red wedding dress and head ornament²⁸ for the traditional Chinese weddings, which are no longer used practically today. Including photos of nostalgic and classical style serves not only the

²⁷ Image Courtesy: verywed.com
<http://verywed.com/album/singleImage.php?a=157725&ai=5511272> (March 25, 2010)

²⁸ (鳳冠 *Feng guan*, literally meaning 'Phoenix crown')

function of role play; it is also of interest to senior members of the family. As Taiwan is a highly westernized country with Chinese heritage, and historically it had been a part of Japan between 1895 and 1945, the entire society has received cultural influences from very different sources over the years. The visual identity of Taiwanese people has always been a blend in between the mentioned cultures, thus it is very natural to have mixed style in terms of dress and the location of shooting. Inconsistency of styles has never been a problem for Taiwanese people. Some favorite locations include Japanese style wooden house left (or reconstructed) from the pre-war occupation period, and buildings that imitate European architecture, for example Baroque style building and Mediterranean white/blue painted structures. While the younger generation grew up watching American TV shows, the older generation (born prior to 1950) had received either Japanese or Chinese (mainland) education of old times, and they are more conservative when encountering new things. Clashing of ideas between the young generation and the older generation is common on daily basis. Including photos of traditional Chinese dress style is not just appealing to the young couples but at the same time signifies a sense of connection to history. Despite this link by clothing in old style is superficial and reflects no knowledge and admiration of the Chinese history, it serves as a reassurance for the older generations in the family (who are also an important part of the audience for bridal photography, as will be discussed later) that their offspring have not deserted the heritage.

Figure 2 also contained a photographic code (technique) often used in portrait photography, a shallow depth-of-field. By using lens with larger aperture opening size, only a small part of the picture (the couple) is in focus and leaves background fuzzy or blurred. This kind of technique is also used in macro photography of flowers and small objects. Such technique can also make it easier to avoid problems with the

background, especially when background is not clean enough. In the case of Figure 2, the background in the alley may contain things not desired in the photo, such as electrical wires or objects that cannot be removed from the scene. Blurring the background solves the problem.

Class difference.

The meanings and attitudes toward this “play-act” costumes in the pictures are more than simply going to the theme park and have some souvenir photos of exotic or cartoon-like character. The diversified dress and gowns in the bridal photography indicates the fact that it is a play of identities, both displacing and replacing the identities of the couple in real life, even if just for the short day of shooting. The costume acts just like a mask- covering what is really beneath it.

In Rose’s discussion of the semiotic way of analyzing an image²⁹, the role of class in the society is mentioned and is closely connected to ideology. One thing worth noting in the bridal photography is the representation of class is vague.

One hint traditionally used to interpret social class in the images, the clothing or dress of people, is totally eliminated in bridal photography. As the very fundamental business model of bridal photography is to provide diversified style of dress on rental basis for the photo shooting, it is rather common to see albums with different couples renting similar or same dress. In other words, there is no cue in the picture regarding the actual identity or social class of the couple. In this way it is similar to shooting a film, where the actors and actress are just putting on the designated costume as required. The couples are “equalized” in the picture, it will not show if they are

²⁹ Gillian Rose. *Visual methodologies an introduction to the interpretation of visual materials* Sage, Thousand Oaks, California, 2001, p.71.

teacher, doctor or vendor by profession, and from this viewpoint every couple gets the chance to be equal. (This is part of the great contradiction: while every couple wishes and believes that their photography is unique and no one wants to be that average Joe and Jane, the fact is that the pictures are just customized standardized mass products). The attraction and the big key to the dream factor of bridal photography, according to salespersons' words, is that 'any girl can be that beautiful princess in the pictures'. With heavy make-up and fancy dress, it doesn't matter who the girl really is, or what she looks like originally. But such statement is more of an illusion and stands true only when a single image is considered. In reality, couples from the upper social class (or higher economical level) are able to afford a higher sum of money spent on bridal photography, which means more location shooting and more prints of the photo albums. While every bride is the focus of the shooting day, the equality does not happen afterwards. Besides the location and number of the prints ordered for bridal photography, other details of the wedding plan, including the location and number of guests invited to the actual banquet, will all show the difference between social classes.

2.3 A playful relationship



Figure 3. Boxing while wearing dress.³⁰

Extending on the topic of identity, bridal photography touches not only the external social identity, but also the internal (domestic) identity, e.g. roles within the family and gender relations. While Taiwan is a westernized society, the traditional patriarchal social values still dominate in the family. Here in Figure 3, the bride and groom put on boxing gloves while wearing dress and suit, and the bride pretends to punch and beat the groom. It is done in the studio with a single color background, with no clues of location or context, the reference to time or date does not exist either. The image itself contains cues of the unrealistic nature, both in the couples' unserious expression and the fact that they are wearing formal dress instead of boxing clothes. The point in this posed image is the reversed gender relations from reality. This type of image has been more common since around the year 2000. Young couples love them but the older generations often show their dismay.³¹ Another example of such

³⁰ Image Courtesy: verywed.com

<http://verywed.com/album/singleImage.php?a=159723&ai=5583069> (March 27, 2010)

³¹ Adrian, p.105.

an image is shown as in Figure 3 in which the bride sits on the groom's shoulder as they have a location shooting at the beach.



Figure.4 Couple at beach³²

The couples consider these power-reversing images to be fun and creative, and as they are perceived as merely posed performance, there is no negative intention in it. This image by no means suggests that the groom is really submissive to his bride or their relation is dominated by the bride. To the older generation, however, photography is still interpreted as suggestive of truth and has to be done properly and respectfully³³. For them, this kind of pictures is considered to be suggestive of the bride's disrespect of her husband, and that the husband is not masculine or tough enough to earn his wife's submission. Such violation of male dignity and leadership is a taboo in traditional Chinese culture.

Interestingly, while the older generations consider this kind of power-reversing

³² Image Courtesy: verywed.com

<http://verywed.com/album/singleImage.php?a=157738&ai=5511895> (March 27, 2010)

³³ Adrian, p.105.

playful image to be offensive, they accept other posed bridal images with no problem of confusion with reality. There is obviously a double standard in their judgment.

Bonnie Adrian also observed that there is the double standard in that mothers would be offended by the image that “undermine male prestige and predominance” of the son, but at the same time encourage the daughter to take advantage of such gender role reversals³⁴ On the other hand, the couple in Figure 3 can be interpreted in a different way. The bride sitting on the groom’s shoulder may be suggestive of the groom actively taking care of his wife-to-be and demonstrates his strength to carry the heavy burdens of life.

The issue of gender stereotyping is a key topic in visual studies, and it is reflected by representations and the purpose in Taiwanese bridal photography.

Another topic brought up by figure 3 is the asymmetry of clothing between the couple. In many bridal images, the brides are dressed up in gowns whereas the grooms may wear jeans and ordinary casual shirts. This shows that the fundamental focus of bridal image is the bride, and is again closely connected to unequal gender stereotyping and social expectation. After all, it is not named groom photography, and one important purpose of bridal image is to preserve the beauty and youthful image for the bride, compensate the sacrifice made by the bride as she assumes the role as a wife and mother. In a patriarchal society, the change of role is more significant for the female than the male after marriage; for it is the bride who enters a new family, a new identity. In fact, the difference of identity for a girl before and after marriage in Taiwan is clear and even extends to afterlife – married women are to be buried in the husbands’ family graveyard after they died, while unmarried women are buried in their maiden family graveyard. And there is an old saying in Chinese that married women are ‘spilled water that cannot be retracted back’,³⁵

³⁴ Adrian, p.105.

³⁵ 嫁出去的女兒是潑出去的水。(it means the separation of a married woman from her maiden

The salon salespersons describe that the bridal photography shooting day is the day which ‘every girl can be the princess’, without mentioning anything about a matching prince. Bridal photography is not about gender equality, it is about fantasy.

2.4 Nature and naturalism



Figure.5 Couple on a small boat³⁶

The term ‘nature’ has two different meanings in bridal photography, and the first one is the natural scenes as background. The link of photography and nature landscape started early, Peter Henry Emerson suggested in 1880s a style by

family.)

³⁶ Image Courtesy: verywed.com

<http://verywed.com/album/singleImage.php?a=157721&ai=5511088> (March 27, 2010)

photographing the subjects “in their natural environment [...] relying on the selection of subject, lighting, framing and selective focusing to make an artistic camera image.”³⁷ What Emerson suggested was against using retouching or post-exposure modification to change the picture, just present the view as it really is.

About a hundred years later, the bridal photography in Taiwan takes naturalism with a different approach, mainly using nature as background in which the couple can be situated. In Figure 5, the couple is photographed on a lake and has a relaxed expression (the bride lies down in her gown), there are flowers decorating the boat but obviously they are not rowing the boat, since there is no paddle in the picture. As for lighting, the sun shines from left side and the couple is illuminated by extra lighting from the upper-right direction, the evidence can be seen by the shadow on the groom’s chin. The over saturated color of the water and the gown indicated that the picture’s hue/saturation setting has been modified in Photoshop.

This kind of photograph with nature as background is miles away from the original naturalistic idea. The subject does not engage in the surrounding natural environment, they are simply there but do not belong there, with clothes that are not fit for activity in the nature. Why do people like it, if such “pictures with nature background” do not look realistic or logically sound? Obviously people do not look for a picture of truth about nature; they look for romantic and beautiful images. For bridal photography, the very goal is to create beautiful pictures, as far away from routine working life as possible, and natural scene fits this need well.

Bridal photography does not have to be practical, and it should not be. In the picture with nature landscape, there is no presentation of the rough terrain and disturbance caused by insects. Not only looking good, the use of nature background has a deeper level of meaning. There are various signifiers of love and relationship in

³⁷Hirsch, p.186.

the Chinese language that use nature scenery as the symbol. For example in Figure 4, the couple shows up at the beach with a gown. Pictures at a beach are popular not simply because it is pretty. In Chinese the idiom “until the sea become dry and the stones become rotten” is used to describe the durability of love, that it shall last until eternity³⁸.

In the case of Figure 5, the boat on the lake carrying the couple signifies the couple embarking on a new journey of life, a new voyage together.

Both the beach and nature landscape are related to romantic concepts with the notion of travel in the western cultures³⁹, hence these two examples are also evidence of foreign influences.

The second usage of the term ‘nature’ refers to an abstract idea in the context of bridal photography. By saying “this picture looks natural”, people mean that the picture gives a feeling that is not too exaggerated. The contrast to natural here would be “fake” or “unreal”. And the criteria of judgment here are not based on composition or actual background, rather focusing on lighting technique/ expressions and makeup of the couple. Adrian indicated in her research that to acquire such “natural” pictures, the photographer must be skilled in leading the couple’s emotion and create a relaxed atmosphere during shooting.⁴⁰ Because most people who are not professional models feel nervous or stiff in front of professional cameras, the photographer (like a film director) needs to not only control the camera but also instruct the couple for the gesture/expression. With the help of assistant from the side, the photographer tells the couple where to look, how to put their hands. Compared with the traditional studio shots in which the couples stare with the camera blankly, these so called ‘natural’ pictures are in reality constructed to look natural. Being constructed does not cause

³⁸ Original written in Chinese as 海枯石爛(*hai ku shi lan*), Online Dictionary of Idiom Ministry of Education, Taiwan <<http://dict.idioms.moe.edu.tw/pho/fya/fya01075.htm>> (April 28, 2010)

³⁹ Frosh, p.139.

⁴⁰ Adrian, p.197.

conflict with the idea of ‘natural’. A more precise definition of natural here would be ‘the picture does not look obviously arranged, containing little or no trace that it is staged.’ The requirement of natural is not equal to basic, simple style of gown or realistic makeup skills. Adrian noted that a salon featuring very realistic style of photograph and basic makeup quickly went out of business.⁴¹ In fact, the bridal photography does contain a function of showing off, not necessarily of the richness of the family but more of the beauty of the bride. Over-simplistic image presentation and makeup skills which result in understatement of the bride’s beauty is thus unacceptable.

2.5 Exotic dreams



Figure 6 Mediterranean / Greek style⁴²

⁴¹ Adrian, p.231.

⁴² Image Courtesy: verywed.com

<http://verywed.com/album/singleImage.php?a=157670&ai=5508382> (March 26, 2010)

There has been a trend of bridal photography to use an exotic theme as a background, and what was previously presented by means of painted backgrounds in the studio is now replaced by constructed scenes to achieve a more convincing image. In Figure 6 the couple is shown in front of a white and blue structure resembling the colors of buildings in Greece islands. The color combination of blue and white – the colours of the Greek national flag - became a well-known symbol for Greece after the book *I Left My Heart in Aegean Sea* was published in 2003⁴³, and Greece also became a popular destination for honeymoons.

Other common backgrounds for exotic feeling bridal photography include churches of western architecture style, or existing Baroque style buildings from the Japanese Occupation Era⁴⁴. While only very few people can actually afford to go on actual location shooting trips abroad⁴⁵, most ordinary couples can find a more reasonable solution to make a dream with these constructed backgrounds. The reason for doing these exotic photos might be explained by what Roland Barthes suggested as the *noeme* of photography, what was in the photography 'has been there'⁴⁶ Barthes describe that the photos are evidence that its referent existed, as is, and has a non-fictional character, that the people existed in the picture was there at the time the shutter was released. What then, is proved by these pseudo-traveling photos? Such photos do not link to memory of the past (since most of the times these photos are taken prior to that honeymoon travel, and it may not be matching their destination of honeymoon), but rather link to imagination, the imagination of a journey and exciting

⁴³ *I Left My Heart in Aegean Sea* is written by Justin Chen, a computer engineer and amateur photographer who published the book after his online photo album of a trip to Greece became phenomenal. The photos are available online at <http://www.justin-photo.idv.tw/aegean/findex.htm>. (May 1, 2010)

⁴⁴ Taiwan was a part of Japanese Empire between 1895-1945. Many buildings from that period featured different western styles and remain today.

⁴⁵ For example, the CEO of Foxconn corp, Terry Kuo, spent two million Taiwanese dollars and had a team of photographers flown to his private castle in Czech republic when he remarried in 2008. < <http://www.nownews.com/2008/07/19/91-2307072.htm> > (May 2, 2010)

⁴⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Vinate, London, 2000, p.76.

experiences. People who look at these pictures can easily relate the symbols in the photo that signify the exotic, foreign elements to travel photos. Although in contrast to travel photos, the representation power here is more important than photography's power to authenticate, and the exact location is not usually recognizable, the specificity of place is reduced to 'generic' scenery.⁴⁷

People have been connecting photography and traveling for different reasons in many years, and one of the most important functions of photography is to let people see things and scenes that they could not see with their naked eyes, especially due to time and space limitations. Photography has also been used to report the exotic geographic discoveries, as the case of *National Geographic*, and for people who can't afford to travel extensively, the photos from abroad was the way to know the world, especially before the existence of TV and satellite broadcasting. Over the years people have been educated and conditioned to perceive a foreign place through photography and consider it to be real or representative of the place depicted.

Photographic records of actual events can trigger people's imagination, and constructed bridal photography of exotic nature works in a similar way. When people look at a picture like Figure 6, they do not seek for the proof that they have been to the signified location, Greece. If these pictures were considered seriously, they will not suffice and problems will appear. In Figure 6, the white structure resembling a windmill has no actual function, and is only partially constructed. Another popular spot for exotic bridal photography with Renaissance style building is actually the pump room of an old water purification facility designed by Japanese architect Ichiro Nomura⁴⁸. But bridal photography is not like news photography, people do not really look for actual connections to the locations in the picture, nor does it matter that

⁴⁷ Frosh, p.138.

⁴⁸ The building is located in Tap Water Museum in Taipei, a photo of which is available at <http://www.pse100i.idv.tw/n/WATER%20PARK/WATER%20PARK001.htm>, (May 2, 2010)

photographers take pictures only for resemblance in style.

Ernst Bloch pointed out that there is a 'deadening effect' in daily routines which make everything boring or even invisible once it is repeated many times.⁴⁹ The attraction of traveling and the related images is brought by the foreignness, which means that traveling expose people in an environment which everything is new, including the surrounding and the atmosphere. Moreover, Bloch suggested that there is even a link between the travel in this special context (bourgeois honeymoon) and erotic imagination. Since there is a huge difference between travel alone and travel with the beloved person, the imagination ignited by this kind of exotic travel bridal photography is even more attractive than real travel photography. The combination of exotic scene and the wedding gown signifies that this is not an ordinary travel, like a business trip or an excursion with school; it is a journey of love.

This perceived concept, the imagined trip and experience that is very different from daily life, is the key point in this genre of bridal photograph. Considering the historical connection, people in Taiwan started to travel abroad around late 1980s, which was about the same time bridal photography began to flourish. The decade of the 1980s was a period of radical change in Taiwanese society, on one hand the economical growth flourished due to the successful development of manufacturing industry. On the other hand, the restriction on traveling due to hostile relation with mainland China was removed; along with the restriction on freedom and speech (media and publishing industry). It was the time when people started to think about quality of life, the goal switched from merely making a living to enjoy life. Traveling experiences and bridal photography both served as indicators of hope and leisure life.

⁴⁹ Bloch, p.371.

Chapter 3 Thinking about happiness

3.1 Comparison with other art forms

Bridal photography did not come into existence by chance. It is an extension and continuation of different artistic practices. The use of sign and symbols and the schemes of depiction and representation in bridal photography shows the connection to traditions.

Painting

When photography blossomed in the middle of 19th century, one of its main contributions is to create portraits in a faster way compared to oil portraits.⁵⁰ There is a fundamental difference in that photography is a record of what appeared in front of the camera, whereas a painting is an imitation of the scene or person according to the artist's perception and execution. Over hundreds of years people used sketches and different kind of painting to produce visual depictions for persons and events, yet all of those were a kind of selective recording process, they did not record everything. Paintings often feature the time and school in which the artists was involved in, and have strong personal styles. A painter can make a perfected (idealized) representation of the subject person, as it was commonly done in court paintings of royal family members. Regarding this, Sontag pointed out that a photograph, unlike a painting, cannot transcend its subject or visibility.⁵¹ There had been an interesting phenomenon: A photograph is considered more artistic when it looks less photographic, more like a painting.⁵² This applies to the composition, color and focus in the photograph.

Considering the example of Figure 2, the blurry background and shallow

⁵⁰ David Finn, *How to look at photographs*, Harry N. Abrams Inc, New York, 1994, p.52.

⁵¹ Susan Sontag, *On photography* Anchor Books, New York, 1990 p.95.

⁵² Robert Hirsch, *Seizing the Light: A history of photography*, McGraw Hill, 2000, p.120.

depth-of-field⁵³ is indeed like that of a painting, unlike what we can see with naked eyes. Paul Frosh noted, however, there is another difference between photography and paintings in that people tend to take photography as a part of environment and overlooked at, while paintings and films are objects that require and attract critical attention.⁵⁴ In his words, there is a difference between the Glance (short, browsing look) and Gaze (focused, concentrated watching). Due to the fact that people tend to look at photos with very short glances, it became necessary that the photos use easy to understand visual cues and intuitive symbols which can be easily decoded and perceived. In bridal photography, there are various cues and symbols which serve this purpose. The flowers on the boat in Figure 5 and some pictures containing a church in the background are good examples of such simple and direct symbols.

Stock photography

Stock photography is established on the concept of classification. By sorting images according to different category and genres, the images are utilized in visual content industries including advertisement, publishing and can reduce the massive production cost of hiring dedicated photographers and models. To serve the purpose, the images contained symbols that are suggestive of certain messages which can reach the target audiences quickly and effectively. In short words, it is a purposefully manufactured image product. While both stock and bridal images are staged to present a depicted reality, the production of stock photography is fundamentally different from bridal photography in that bridal photography is personalized and the

⁵³ It is a photographic term referring to the partial focus caused by a wider aperture opening of the camera.

⁵⁴ Frosh, p.110.

couple are both models and consumers of the images at the same time, while stock images are produced with the goal of representing generic concepts, instead of specific user in mind. The content of stock photography usually reflects the ongoing trend in the society and the models are usually unrecognizable individuals representing ideas instead of specific identity.

Jacobs reflected that in wedding photography (this also applies to bridal shots in this thesis), as in other ritual photography genres, the couple perform romantic gestures and gazes in front of the camera. The purpose is for the future recollection of past intimacy by the lovers themselves.⁵⁵ Paul Frosh did an in-depth analysis on stock photography, namely the category of romantic couples. He noted that to depict (and designate) a 'romantic couple' is not only to represent an existing social relation, but to construct an object of envy, identification and desire.⁵⁶ Even though he was referring to stock photography, the function of bridal photography can also be described with above words when looked upon by people other than the couple themselves. Both stock photography and bridal photography simultaneously connects reality and fantasy, and both conform to existing and known visual codes so that the produced images can be easily related to. At times, photograph comes with text and it is easy to get the message. But in bridal photography, the images are presented without accompanying caption text, and it is not possible to hear what the persons in the images have to say, the visual clues become even more important. Barthes noted this in his regard of portrait images and wrote that photography cannot say what it lets us see.⁵⁷

Bridal photography is a commodity with enhanced value of personal memory.

This enhanced value exceeds the actual material value (cost) of producing the photo

⁵⁵ Jacobs, D.L. 'Domestic Snapshots: Toward a Grammar of Motives', in Gary Gumpert and Robert Cathcart (eds) *Intermedia: Interpersonal Communications in a Media World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press as cited in Paul Forsh, *Image Factory*, p.124

⁵⁶ Forsh, p.99

⁵⁷ Barthes, p.100

prints. Hence with the symbolic meanings signified in the bridal images comes with the symbolic value exclusively for the couple.

3.2 Capturing happiness?

One of the special characteristics of photography is that it captures what appeared in front of the camera, freezes the moment from the continuum. No other previously existing creative art form was so instant and so direct in the recording function. In other words, a photograph bears witness to the presence of people and things that was there when it was made. Excluding the cases when people manipulate with programs like Photoshop, a photograph is faithful representation of visible facts. It has an evidential power⁵⁸ and is considered to be a carrier of truth. It is used to record crime scenes and presented as court evidence. But can love be proved with visual evidence?

The title of this thesis pointed out the dilemma: Since happiness is not an objective visible fact, as all emotions are abstract and non-tangible, can photograph really capture happiness of the wedding couples? The photography proved that the bride and the groom were both present at the place when the shooting was done, but it cannot prove how firm their relation is, how much they love each other. How then, do people use photograph as a deposit box for happiness and the joy related to wedding? Can bridal photography be a commodity and the memory of happiness at the same time? What kind of happiness?

Visualization of Love, romance and relation

⁵⁸ Barthes, p.107.

The happiness around bridal photography can be divided to multiple layers. On the top level there is a hope for a new chapter of life and the images serves as a tool to visually confirm this joy of finding a spouse and life partner. Bridal photography is a symbol of marriage and happiness, but itself does not prove or guarantee happiness before or after the wedding.⁵⁹ Happiness, however, is also created and attained through the process of making bridal photography. Through massive advertising and collective consciousness (of consumption), the concept of bridal photography became a target of desire associated with wedding, and this is where the second level of happiness comes in. There is an unfamiliarity of being in the play of identities and being the focus of photo-shooting (treated like a magazine model or movie star); this experience is fun and enjoyable. Many women would insist on doing bridal photography despite the high price because it is ‘once of a life time’ experience. The process of identity changing starts with the preliminary work of picking gowns and costumes for photo shooting, which is considered a fun part and a prelude of the wedding.

People look for signs and symbols in the pictures in order to interpret emotional messages. One of visual cues in pictures that easily indicates the happiness (or indeed other emotions) of subjects is facial expression, when combined with body language (gesture and distance between persons) it is effective of conveying messages. For example, propaganda posters used expressions with people looking upward at a distant target to present the feeling of hope⁶⁰. Yet a smiling or happy expression is not necessarily present in wedding or bridal photography. In Figure 1 and Figure 2, with almost one hundred years of difference in time and shot in two different

⁵⁹ In the process of writing this thesis, a friend of mine who did the bridal photography got divorced soon after the wedding. In her disappointment she got rid of the pictures with the ex-husband and kept the pictures which contained only her.

⁶⁰ Examples can be found in *Chinese Propaganda Posters*, Michael Wolf (ed.) Taschen publishing, 2008.

countries, the expressions of the two couples were similarly serious. It cannot be said that simply because of the serious expression, they do not feel joyful about the wedding.

In Figure 1, the picture of Swedish couple in the beginning of 20th century did not look romantic, but it did not affect people's understanding of the picture. Frosh noted that in a picture, people can be physically close yet totally unromantic or physically distanced but full of flirtation.⁶¹ There can be other hints for romantic relation or love than physical closeness and facial expression. In Figure 2, the paper umbrella held by the bride is also a sign of togetherness. The umbrella is only big enough for two persons and protects them against the sun and the rain, it is also a metaphor of taking care of each other, referring to a Taiwanese song "Little Umbrella".⁶² There are many objects or environment that are connected to the concept of love, romantic relationship and marriage in each different cultural context, and it is not necessarily to include explicit physical contacts such as kissing to achieve the purpose of visualizing love and happiness. Frosh observed that "

"the images do not depict or 'contain' romance as though it were a preformed material object, but are part of its ceaseless connotation, citation, reiteration and elaboration, as well as of its differentiation from other categories."⁶³

Sometimes such citation and reiteration may not be even needed. As the bridal photography is both looked upon by the couple themselves and their relatives as well as friends, it can be simply a image of their co-presence while they look at each other.

⁶¹ Frosh, p.122.

⁶² 一隻小雨傘, composed by Ming Huang, the lyric describes a couple holding a little umbrella together, taking care of each other against harsh weather and difficulties.

⁶³ Frosh, p.122.

3.3 Elements of Bridal photography

The contents of bridal photography is simple in a way that it can be described in a formula:

Bride+ (groom) + costume + background + lighting + retouching =Bridal photography.

(The groom does not necessarily appear in every picture.) Yet the elements listed in this formula were not all. According to Barthes, the functions of a photograph are: to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause, to signify, and to provoke desire.⁶⁴ In bridal photography, these functions are indeed fulfilled and the elements can be explained as following:

Escapism

Bridal photography, in contrast of documentary photography, does not record the event as it happens. The goal is to create a fantasy with symbols that frees the couple from the responsibility in reality. Bonnie Adrian suggests that the sole focus and exaltation of the bride actually contrasts with the reality, as marriages in Taiwan do not feature a female-leading model.⁶⁵ Another fact about bridal photography worth noting is that family members are not present in the pictures. For the wedding banquet documentary pictures, group photo with family members is an essential part, but they are not included in bridal photography. The atmosphere created by bridal photography is a world only composed of the couple, nothing else, no other people in the story. From the analysis of Figure 6 in 2.5, the association with travel showed

⁶⁴ Barthes, p.28.

⁶⁵ Adrian, p.11.

such tendency of ‘getting away’, and Figure 5 in 2.4 is even more obvious as there is only the couple on the boat; the water effectively isolated the rest of the world from them. Paul Frosh described this as the promise of leisure

*...is an ideal space of play and pleasure that is distinguished from workplace and home in imagination and in experience: and just as the workplace is the space of production and the family home is the space of reproduction, so leisure is the ethereal, dislocated, freely-floating utopian ‘space’ of consumption..*⁶⁶

Eva Illouz observed that such “contemporary vision of secluded couplehood [...] is a complete withdrawal from the proceedings, rules, and constraints of the urban industrial world and an entry into the euphoric realm of leisure”⁶⁷

The promise of leisure being featured in bridal photography is not only because of the connection to the idea of honeymoon as previously mentioned. Another explanation is that in reality, the wedding (and the planning of) is a difficult, complicated process of reaching compromises between the expectations of two families (or even clans). The time of bridal photography shooting belongs solely to and enjoyed by the couple themselves, the family members do not participate in the shooting. (This does not apply to choosing which images to print and to be included in the album later; it can be intervened as described in 2.3) The creation of a hideaway through bridal photography helps to lessen the stress and anxiety caused by wedding preparation.

Versatileness

⁶⁶ See Frosh, p.139.

⁶⁷ Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997, cited in Frosh, *Image Factory* p.138.

Bridal photography is constantly changing in its nature. In addition to the change of identity for the couple, the style of clothing, makeup and even selection of scenes are being changed with influences from different sources, such as popular films, fashion industry, etc. The effect of the costumes in the bridal photography is not to be dismissed simply as an adornment or irrelevant. In the discussion of clothing and hope, Ernst Bloch described that “With garments women in particular put on a new part of themselves.”⁶⁸ Dress, hairstyle and makeup all convey certain messages, as noted by Fred Davis.⁶⁹ In the context of bridal photography, these details must all be up-to-date to maintain the attraction and to secure customers.. Bridal photography is affected by fashion photography, in which models put on different clothes and become an attraction. With similar lighting technique, bridal photography transformed ordinary girls into models and movie stars. Often when there is a hit film poster or scene, it will be imitated by the salons for bridal shots, such as the scene in *Titanic*⁷⁰ when the characters Jack and Rose stand in the front of the ship and Rose stretched her arms with Jack hugging her from behind.

Both bridal photography and fashion (commercial) photography aim to present aesthetic attractions. Roland Barthes suggested that photographers keep making photos of notable view or scenes but the unfamiliarity and notability decreases once it has been photographed over and over⁷¹. Hence it must be constantly renewed to maintain this notability. Salons that maintain the same style and lack new inspirations in terms of shooting locations or gowns that matches the current fashion trends will lost their business quickly.

⁶⁸ Bloch, p.341.

⁶⁹ Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture and Ideneity*, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p.11.

⁷⁰ *Titanic*, film, directed by James Cameron, Lightstorm Entertainment, 1997.

⁷¹ Barthes, p.34

Commemoration

As creative and fictive as it can be, bridal photography exists for a reason that cannot be forgotten. The biggest impact when people make the vow and enter marriage is the transition in which the bride switches from a single lady to a married woman and the groom switches from a handsome young man to a husband who must take up responsibilities. Bridal photographs are done to serve as a proof for this and convey this transition process visually, informing people that the couple takes up a new status and new roles. From a traditional social definition, people in Taiwan are not considered to be fully grown-ups before they get married, although this concept was challenged by the industrialization of the society, it is still common for young people to live with the parents while they remain single. To appear in the bridal shots with only the spouse is a formal declaration of independence from the parent's family. Often people take the act of signing contracts with bridal salons as the very first confirmation of the intention of getting married between couples.

Spectacle- Unusualness

There are multiple reasons that bridal photography is popular among the wedding couples in Taiwan, and one of the reasons is its nature of spectacle.

Ordinary people take pictures of everything everyday, as Hirsch described the power of photography this way:

Photographic montage allowed people of various levels of artistic skill to take everyday events and reorient them in time and space. This positioned photography as a medium that invited artists to delve in the free association,

*cut and paste world of dreams, enabling the unconscious, repressed residue of socially unacceptable desires and experiences to come to conscious recognition.*⁷²

While many people own a high quality camera, especially in the digital era of 21st century, it is not simple for ordinary people to create professional quality shots at their home studios. The combination of makeup artist, the selection of gowns, and professional lighting techniques in bridal photography salons take the power of reorientation and imagination described above to a higher level, resulting in images of the couple which they do not usually get to see. Bloch observed that people tend to wish trying out oneself in various ways⁷³, and David Finn wrote that photographers have discovered that there are different realities they can portray with their cameras⁷⁴, both points are essential for bridal photography.

Photography is known to provide views that could not be seen with naked eyes, in terms of time, size and angle (such as fisheye lens or frames of stilled motions) and Susan Sontag noted that photography tend to produce the impression of violating ordinary vision⁷⁵. While Sontag was not referring to bridal shots, the attraction of photography with unusual contents is universal. Be it the classical example of a galloping horse's movements or an unusually beautiful portrait of the bride herself, the power of photography is in that it allows people to see things they don't see everyday. Bridal photographers would even use the distortion of fisheye lens to create funny pictures.

Finn has also written his reflection between the vision of the naked eyes and the camera:

'One of the mysteries of the camera is that it enables one to see more

⁷² Hirsch, p.124.

⁷³ Bloch, p.341.

⁷⁴ Finn, p.18.

⁷⁵ Sontag, p.99.

*in less. More aesthetic impact in the confined area of the viewfinder. Less than what can be seen by the naked eye with its wide range of vision.*⁷⁶

This reflection is very interesting, as in the case of Figure 6, the view in the picture is indeed limited by the angle of lens and only a partial scene is present in the picture. The concept of Greek/ Mediterranean atmosphere is perceived through this limited vision without problem. Had the camera a full angle vision, it might be exposed that the scene is not really in Greece and the surrounding environment is not completely constructed. It is exactly this restricted vision of the camera that created a spectacle which generates more imagination. Photographers often use this selective composition to convey an idea, to construct a reality in a limited view.

The spectacle in bridal photography is also fueled by beautification, the idea which propelled this bridal photography business. Sontag mentioned that there has always been a struggle between beautification and truth-telling in the history of photography.⁷⁷ To this day, the two aspects are represented by the two branch of wedding photography: The first being documentary approach of photography on the wedding day and banquet, and the second is bridal photography discussed in this thesis, which reflects not so much reality, but more beautification. The spectacle of the bride in heavy makeup and gowns can be summarized by Bloch's concept of 'show off' factor.⁷⁸, which is the reason that people try to make a better-than-real impression by means of changing clothes, applying cosmetics. It is for the purpose of showing off the external appearance, hoping to attract attention from peers. At the same time such attempt to 'wrap' oneself with apparels, comparing with and following the trends in shopping windows or magazine photos turned the person (here the bride) into a commodity. While Bloch wrote this analysis of human

⁷⁶ Finn, p.32.

⁷⁷ Sontag, p.86.

⁷⁸ Bloch, p.339.

behavior in the 1940s, long before the existence of Taiwanese bridal photography, it fits very well for the industry. For bridal photography is indeed purchasable commodity and the bridal salons do have huge display rooms with windows facing the street⁷⁹, trying to lure the couples to purchase the ‘spectacle of a lifetime’. With the spectacle comes the gaze, and this will be discussed in the next section, how people look/consume such bridal images.

3.4 Looking at bridal photography

Photography has one very simple and important purpose, which is to be looked at. For many years, photographs have been presented in the form of an album, a book-like shape, as noted by Susan Sontag.⁸⁰ The album’s book-like form of presentation has indeed an association with the story-telling function of the book, and the practice of collecting family memories by adding pictures gradually to the family album is widespread. The birth of child, graduation ceremony and snapshots of birthday celebration, these images are collected in the family albums and shared with visitors of the family. The photo albums became a way to categorize, sort and preserve memories.

In the case of Taiwanese bridal photography, the albums are produced in large prints, usually 18 inch or bigger, before the wedding take place. Photoshop-adjusted and featuring different gowns, these bridal albums are even an important display object at the wedding banquet hall starting from the 1990s⁸¹.

When the guests arrive at the banquet, they browse the albums on a table at the

⁷⁹ Adrian, p.61.

⁸⁰ Sontag, p.71.

⁸¹ Adrian, p.4.

entrance⁸². This practice has its social meaning and practical reason. In Taiwanese wedding banquets, there are usually 300 to 500 guests that attend, many of which are the friends of the parents who barely know or have seen the couple before. The guests expect to see the bridal photography prints before the couple arrives for the banquet; it helps preparing their encounter with the couple and is comparable to travelers who look for pictures of their destination prior to embarking on the journey. The large print albums of the couple give guests a brief idea of the couple and show the pride of the parents⁸³.

Other than the large print albums, banquet guests will also receive one or two small bridal photo cards (usually in the size of business cards) as a souvenir and receipt of the wedding present.⁸⁴ After the wedding, some couples will choose one or two large prints of their bridal images and frame them as decoration of their bedroom.⁸⁵ The parents of the couple will usually keep a smaller album of the bridal shots as well. Bridal photography is both looked upon in private settings by the couple, their family and in public by guests to the banquet, friends or coworkers in their offices.

3.5 The influence of digitization and internet.

Bridal photography had been popular before the digitalization of photography in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As digital camera and image processing on computer became widespread practice, the workflow and the nature of bridal photography was

⁸² Adrian, p.74.

⁸³ It should be noted that the parents of the couples are considered to be the 'host' of the wedding banquet, especially the parents of the groom. For them, it is the occasion that they present their daughter-in-law to the public.

⁸⁴ The banquet is paid for by the groom's parents. However the guests are expected to come with an envelope with money in it as the wedding present for the couple, thereby reimbursing the expense of the banquet.

⁸⁵ Adrian, p.74.

changed radically. The most significant change is the time needed to see the preview and the number of shots taken. The cost of film has been eliminated, and after one day of shooting the couple can see hundreds of preview photos on the computer screen without lengthy waiting. They are provided with a downsized preview copy on DVD-ROM or even an login account for a online album service, then given several days of time to discuss with friends and family which ones to choose include in the printed album. Those photos will undergo further retouching. Previously in the film era, this would take weeks of time.

Has the digital workflow changed the nature of bridal photography, other than the pace and time spent on waiting? Lev Manovich has done a reflection on the change of photography by digital technology.⁸⁶ Lev suggested that there is a paradox about the term digital photography, while people believe that the digitalization will fundamentally change the way people perceive pictures (and even films), it has actually limited effect on people's understanding of signs and the representation functions of the photos. The physical media is indeed changed, yet the visual presentation on printed albums is still conveying the same imaginations discussed in chapter two.

The widespread usage of Internet also changed the way the couples choose bridal photography salons. As noted previously, portal websites providing information about services and forums related to wedding, including the site [verywed.com](http://www.verywed.com) which the images in this thesis are from, has become a common source for ideas when couples plan their weddings, they can also get comments and exchange experiences from other people who went the process previously.

⁸⁶ Lev Manovich, 'The paradoxes of digital photography' in *Photography Reader*, Liz Wells (ed.) p.241-249.

Retouching

One difference does exist between the film and digital files stored on hard drives. Retouching is now easier than ever, since it is easy to alter contents in the image with any computer that runs Photoshop

Retouching did not begin with digitization. Robert Hirsch wrote about history of retouching. Ever since 1855, the retouching of photography brought the possibility of changing the photo from representing total truth to an idealized version, making people look better than they really are.⁸⁷ Retouching in digital age is much easier, has a lower barrier than before, and it is even possible to undo the changes. Now it would not require a trained technician working in the darkroom to fix the picture. Even consumers can take away imperfections like wrinkles, spots, acnes, and even whiten the teeth.⁸⁸

Retouching in bridal photography is a necessary practice and people expect such images with the imperfections removed. Hirsch brought up the relation between retouching and enlargement of picture; as the picture is made into large prints, small imperfections become obvious.⁸⁹ When the images are printed in 30-inch size, any spots or acnes will be highly visible. The heavy retouching reflects that the spirit of bridal photography does not seek to be faithful representation but rather an illusion of perfection.

Sharing

⁸⁷ Hirsch p.88

⁸⁸ Chen, p.84

⁸⁹ Hirsch, p.89

There is a bigger change of bridal photography in digital and Internet age: online sharing. It is now very common for the couple to post their bridal shots on their personal online album or Facebook pages. In the past, to show or send the bridal images to friends required ordering additional (regular 4x6 inch) prints which is costly. By posting the images online, it is not only free but also possible to receive friend's comments on the website. People even take one or two very small thumbnail sizes bridal image as their personal icon in instant messaging programs such as MSN or Skype. These online distributions bring up a higher visibility of the bridal images both before the wedding as sneak-peek previews and after, for the people who couldn't take part in the wedding ceremony.

Most of the images shared on the online albums are of very small size, (usually below 1,024 pixels in width or height, in order to fit the screen resolution and faster transmission on the Internet). Lev Manovich also brought up this issue, how much information are preserved / lost in the digital age compared to the traditional film-based photography.⁹⁰ Current digital cameras provide more pixels than needed, yet more pixels do not mean better fidelity.

While the current digital technology permits a huge amount of details to be stored in one single image, even surpassing the traditional photography on film, the sharing of bridal images on the Internet indicated that the real influence brought by the digital revolution is not improvement of image quality but rather the circulation of the images. Bridal images are now seen by more viewers, discussed and commented, more public than ever.

⁹⁰ Lev Manovich, 'The paradoxes of digital photography' in *Photography Reader*, p.243

Conclusion:

This thesis analyzed several Taiwanese bridal photographs with focus on the symbols and signified meanings. By using semiotic analysis, I presented some characteristics of bridal images in Taiwanese cultural context, and how it is affected by different influences, including tradition, foreign media and economical, social conditions.

The goal of this thesis is to complement the existing research on Taiwanese bridal photography which is mostly concentrating on sociological approach and not actually analyzing on visual content of the photographs.

Starting with a background introduction, the discussion continued on the styles of nostalgic, natural scenery and exotic themes. Several topics were brought up in the process, namely the play of identity and the nature of this performed romantic relationship. The relation between the fantasies and the reality in the pictures were also discussed.

“Photography can be the objective of the three things: to do, to undergo, and to look⁹¹”, this reflection by Barthes on photography is well suited for describing what I find about bridal images. This study suggests that bridal photography in Taiwan is a specialized hybrid development of local aesthetics and fantasy. Starting from simple functions of providing a proof of marriage in the early times, it has evolved to be both an industry of desire and a commodity to be consumed. It is also closely related to the gender roles in Taiwan, because it is the bride who assumes upon marriage a new identity as well as the role of the wife and mother, and bridal photography serves as a memory of her youthful beauty and her time as a free young woman. This is reflected in the visual presentation of actual images, the focus on the bride can be interpreted as a compensation and commemoration of the change she faces.

⁹¹ Barthes, p.9

Critique of this thesis

This thesis is an attempt to bring the visuality of bridal photography into focus. It is limited by the scale of research that I have only selected 5 modern images from Taiwan and one old photo from Sweden. The five images covered different genre and aspects of bridal photography but unfortunately do not provide a comparison of changes over the time since the 1980s when bridal photography started to be a category of its own. Another weakness in this thesis is that the images are analyzed at an overview scale, and the analysis of image details, which required higher resolution and partial cropped examples, are missing in current research.

Suggestions for future research

This thesis is only a beginning of the research on the topic of bridal photography, and there are several possibilities for further research. The first one would be a specialized study on the fashion of gowns and costumes in bridal photography, the second would be a chronicle study of evolvments of image styles since the 1980s to the present day. The third possibility is an in-depth study on the gender representation in bridal photography, and it might even include a comparison with other genres of photography.

This thesis found that bridal images are a highly contextualized use of photography. It can be described as a materialization of longings, and pursue of leisure life is an important key to understand the concept of bridal photography. The withdrawal of the couple from the rest people in the images is the core symbol of bridal photography. In addition, bridal photography has become part of the wedding

ritual and contains declarative value in that the couples use performed intimacy to declare their decisions without explicit verbal expression. Thus happiness is not simply captured on images but also created in the process of image-making.

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