Packaged Glamour: Constructing the Modern Bride in China's Bridal Media

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Abstract

This essay examines the images of the bride constructed by China's burgeoning bridal media that sell lavish wedding products and services. Through the lens of semiotics, the author focuses on analyzing bridal magazines widely circulated in China's consumer culture. The analysis shows that China's evolving wedding industry adapts the trite, oppressive trope of "romantic" Western wedding rituals into a bricolage of global fashions, lifestyles, beauty regimens, and marriage tips for the Chinese bride. Conveniently tapping into the rhetoric of neoliberal consumerist agency and postfeminism, the wedding industry repackages patriarchal domination over the bride-to-be in the process of generating profits and disseminating the ideal of consumer one-upmanship. The author further argues that the modern Chinese bride, seemingly empowered within the opulent consumption at her wedding, neither escapes from the gender scripts of Chinese society nor celebrates a significant enhancement of her status in her marital relationship. In this regard, the bridal industry normalizes heterosexual matrimony and reinscribes women's subordinate position in marriage and love.

Key words -

The Chinese bride, bridal media texts, lavish weddings, neoliberal consumerism, postfeminism, gender scripts

Introduction

... a convoy of ten Mercedes-Benz led by a Lincoln limousine preceded up the Chang'an Avenue in Beijing and stopped before a grand hotel. Flowers, balloons and small figurines decorated the motorcade. The newly wed couple stepped out of the limousine and were quickly surrounded by photographers, video cameras and a cheering crowd. This is the scene of a genuine modern day wedding in China (Guo, 2002, China.org.cn).

The above scenario depicted in a journalistic survey magnifies a compelling phenomenon in China's socio-cultural landscape since the millennium: elaborate weddings being in vogue and the seemingly private issues of love and marriage becoming the showcase of class status. The so-called "modern day wedding," a local spectacle created by the country's nouveau riche, embodies not only the uprising of China's wedding industry, but also the country's increasing economic power especially after its political accession to WTO. Against the escalating torrents of globalization, the impact of Western wedding rituals on the local matrimonial tradition has caught scholars' critical attention (Adrian, 2003, 2006; Gillette, 2000; Goldstein-Gidoni, 1997; Otnes & Pleck, 2003). As early as the 1990s, Adrian's (2003) ethnographic study of the Taiwanese bridal industry points to the local culture's starting trend of emulating Western feminine images disseminated via mass media. Adrian (2006) also notes that in the mid-1990s Taiwanese investors were opening beauty salons in mainland China and that gowns considered outdated and tattered in Taiwan were shipped to the mainland and reused among the "less discriminating" mainlanders (p. 78). Interestingly, the postmillennial consumer culture has witnessed the upper-middle class mainlanders ascending the rungs of the international fashion hierarchy. According to a most recent BBC news report, China's wedding industry in its totality is worth over 80 billion USD, with the cost of weddings showing no sign of decrease as a result of the growing middle-class (Pressly, 2011). Like the Taiwanese bride, the mainland bride hitherto partakes in the role of an avid consumer of what Otnes and Pleck (2003) call "lavish weddings," which used to mark the privilege of the Euro-American bride.

Indeed, the modern Chinese bride¹, turning into a divisive class sym-

¹ In this paper, I use the term "the modern Chinese bride" in contrast to the "Taiwanese bride" and "Western bride" in the existing literature. However, as my elaborations later on suggest, Chinese women are by no means homogeneous or free from class, gender, and ethnic categorizations. I agree with Hershatter's (2007) advice that nuances among Chinese women need to be recognized in Chinese cultural studies. In my analysis, "the modern Chinese bride" tokens the haves and the privileged, who can afford all the luxury of an exorbitant wedding package.

bol, seems empowered within the opulent Wedding consumption. Adorned with a brand-name tight-bodiced gown, lacey veil, stiletto, tiara, and cosmetics, the modern bride presents a sharp contrast to her counterparts of previous generations. In Chinese historicity, Chinese women were victims of patriarchal families, and arranged marriage and polygamy systems. As Zhang Yimou's (1991) well-acclaimed blockbuster Raise the Red Lantern depicts, the feudal wife herself tokened blatant gender oppression in the not so distant memories of the pre-communist arranged marriage and polygamy systems. Zhang's (1991) masterpiece vividly magnifies the atrocious victimization of the concubines who competed for their master's gaze, symbolized by the bizarre ritual of lighting the red lanterns at the door of the favored wife. Historians also note that in the social realities of China's feudal past, the bride remained voiceless, as if blindly following the fate of her arranged matrimony (Croll, 1980; Watson & Ebrey, 1991). The exchanges of properties between the families in the form of betrothal gifts from the groom's family, and of dowry from the bride's family implied that the bride was part of the property being transferred in the wedding ceremony (Watson & Ebrey, 1991). The traditional wedding costume consisted of a veil made of opaque fabrics. The veil, intended to make the bride appear shy and feminine, disguised and blinded her from the moment she departed from her parents' household until the moment of the wedding ceremony's completion when she was passively carried by the groom to their new bedroom. The bride of the feudal past was the unseeing player of the wedding, who had no control over her own rite of passage of transforming from a single woman into an immobilized bride and finally into a wife, encumbered with familial responsibilities and filial piety.

With the practice of betrothal gifts and dowry exchanges decreasing in the postsocialist era, the contemporary bride seemingly dominates her wedding ceremony, indulged in her self-centered consumption of the wedding industry, usually in the form of a globalizing "one-stop center," which provides packaged wedding services ranging from making up and dressing up the bride, photographing, and arranging bouquets to catering just about everything else relevant to the celebration (D. Chen, 2003).

Such a luxurious wedding practice presents a stark contrast to that of the Mao era, during which the rituals of frugality ceremonies in the

city hall prevailed. Couples were commonly declared married by a Communist Party member, say, a leader from the husband's or the wife's workplace. A spartan reception followed the unassuming ceremony where tea and homemade food was served. As anthropologist Constable (2006) recalls, the Cultural Revolution portraits of brides, for instance, showed "women in the same poses, clothing, and with the same expressions as men, but sometimes as smaller in size" whereas the modern bridal images underscored women's gender identity especially via conspicuous consumption of feminine products (p. 50). The dramatically changed outlook of the modern bride against China's vast historical backdrop triggers this particular study. This author argues that the material abundance accessible to the bride in the discourse of consumerism does not translate into the demise of patriarchal and hegemonic control over the bride. Scholarly discussions have shed light on the ways contemporary bridal industry, asserting its strong institutional power, commercializes weddings and disseminates hegemonic messages about gender roles, and heterosexual love, and marriage. The romanticized images of the Western bride, dressed up, made up, and coiffed for the supposedly most important day of her life, have received much criticism, as such images symbolize gender oppression on the beautified female body in the name of her rite of passage (Adrian, 2003; Engstorm, 2003, 2008; Engstorm & Semic, 2003; Levine, 2005; Otnes & Pleck, 2003). Borrowing from the existing studies, this paper examines the images of the bride constructed within China's burgeoning wedding industry that sells lavish wedding products and services. More specifically, the author focuses on analyzing both the print issues and Web pages of the bridal magazines widely circulated in China's consumer culture.

Whereas much research focuses on the bridal industry in the West and the ways it becomes a purveyor of hegemonic control, this study is centered on an analysis on the spread of consumerist ideologies in mainland China against the sweeping tide of globalization. This author is particularly concerned about the process of the global joining the local in producing new, oppressive gendered meanings that are leaving indelible marks on local women and their identity formation (see Evans, 2006). The popular texts of China's bridal media constitute a microcosmic yet revealing case to elucidate how the blending of global and local forces reinscribes the local woman's subordinate position in

marriage and love. While current studies find the local emulating Western wedding rituals as a result of imbalanced transnational flows of cultural capital (Adrian, 2003, 2006; Otnes & Pleck, 2003), these studies have not yet identified the local industry's nuanced adaptations of the tropes of Western weddings and the extent to which such adaptations construct the imagery of the Chinese bride. The burgeoning Chinese wedding industry points to a rich site wherein the hegemonic global forces join the local systems in fomenting new gendered meanings and gender politics. In other words, the lavish wedding, along with the imported Western rituals, conveys much more than "sophistication, luxury, and status" in Chinese culture (Otnes & Pleck, 2003, p. 199). Rather, the extravaganza of the wedding itself deflects the evolving regulatory mechanism of gender toward the consumerist agency of the Chinese bride.

The following analysis shows that China's evolving wedding industry adapts the trite, oppressive trope of "romantic" Western wedding rituals into a bricolage of global fashions, lifestyles, beauty regimens, and marriage tips for the Chinese bride. Conveniently tapping into the rhetoric of consumerist agency and postfeminism, the wedding industry re-packages patriarchal domination over the bride in the process of generating profits and disseminating the ideal of consumer one-upmanship. It is further argued that the modern Chinese bride, seemingly empowered within her hedonistic wedding consumption, neither escapes from the gender scripts of Chinese society nor celebrates a significant enhancement of her status in her marital relationship. In particular, the bridal media normalizes heterosexual matrimony and reinscribes women's subordinate position in marriage and love.

Consumerist Agency, Postfeminist Mentality, and the Rise of Wedding Industry

The dramatic changes of China's wedding rituals jibe with the rapid growth of the wedding industry, an in-depth understanding of which needs to be contextualized within a welter of consumerist and gender discourses. In the early 1980s, the post-Mao open-door policy marked not only the inception of the watershed economic reform, but also the spread of Euro-American-led neoliberalism (E. Chen, 2012). Notably,

the meanings of "neoliberalism" in the Chinese contexts have departed from Alexander Rüstow's original conceptualization of the term, which is defined as "the priority of the price mechanism, the free enterprise, the system of competition and a strong and impartial state" (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009, pp. 13-14). As shown in the governmental report titled "China's Progress toward the Millennium Development Goal" (Anonymous, 2008), China's economy reform, in its developmental phases, manifests the central government's strong regulating role toward the common goal of achieving "Xiao Kang" (translated as "moderately prosperous society"). In the process of opening up to the outside world, the Chinese state exerts constant control over the time and space for the inflow and outflow of transnational capitals and resources. However, the neoliberal values of state deregulation, marketization, and privatization have become pervasive in sections of the marketplace, which pose the least threat to the state dominance, the wedding industry being a case in point. Initiated from Deng Xiaoping's notorious slogan "Getting Rich is Glorious," the market economy eventually led to what Davis (2000) terms as a "consumer revolution," during which the central state, state-owned enterprises, privatized industries, and joint ventures partake in the important role of fusing the local and global forces.

The rhetoric of consumer choice and agency, as a significant part of capitalist values, pervades Chinese everyday life. Such rhetoric, as Yang (2011) and Chen (2012) concur, resonates with Foucault's (2008) discussions of "biopolitics," a form of self-initiative governance that commands active choice and self-responsibility of the individualized consumer. Both scholars observe that the advocacy of consumerist agency has seeped into China's gender politics and left deep imprints on the corporeality of the female body and femininity as well as on the modern woman's consumer lifestyle (E. Chen, 2012; Yang, 2011). Yang (2011) is quick to note that the modern Chinese woman is constantly tempted to consume beautification products and services such as cosmetics and cosmetic surgery apropos of appearing younger and thus presumably more sexually attractive. Indeed, the self-disciplined woman consumer showcases her enhanced purchasing power and contributes tremendously to the prosperity of a beauty economy, a term that broadly refers to the utilization of feminine beauty for such profit-driven socio-economic activities as selling fashion, cosmetics, and beautification

procedures, to name a few (X. Zhou, 2004; Xu & Feiner, 2007; Yang, 2011). However, the same economically empowered woman lacks the critical consciousness to detect the convoluted mechanism of gender oppression so quietly aligned with the neoliberal values.

In the representational terrain, Chen (2012) finds that the market logic exerts its influence on both local and global media's construction of heroines who appear to "have it all": beauty, sexual attractiveness, and financial independence. Chen's (2012) analysis of Shanghai Baby, a novel representative of China's popular vet controversial chic lit, points to the ostensible resemblance between the fashion-conscious, pleasure-seeking, and sexually confident Shanghai women and their American counterparts in Sex and The City, a contentious six-year run HBO drama series that has gone global since its debut in 1998. Like Carrie's social circle, Chinese Coco and her female friends seem to enjoy financial security and consumer freedom over upscale commodities, world fashion, and even men. However, these female protagonists in both the American and Chinese versions fail to transcend the constraints of patriarchy entrenched in their cultures. After all, their display of self-control is contained within the consumption arena. Despite their career success, cosmopolitan sophistication, and cultural competence, these modern women longingly subject themselves to the male power and the institution of heterosexual love and marriage. Chic lit is not the sole media genre that mirrors the façade of female empowerment in China's consumerist discourse. The year 2010 witnessed the popularity of reality dating shows on Chinese television. The show with the highest profile Fei Cheng Wu Rao (If You Are the One) aired on Jiangsu Satellite Television Channel recruits, for each episode, 24 women (aged between early 20s and mid 30s) as participants to search for a date, boyfriend, or even husband among five bachelors who become the final players only after scrutinizing interviews with the show's production committee. The show has captivated millions of TV viewers at home and abroad, as they are intrigued by the social drama playing live on the stage, where the young women wield their "power" of questioning, challenging, and switching on and off their stage lights to determine the success or failure of each individual male player. The women on the stage, hailing from various parts of the country, share the conspicuous commonalities of youth, beauty, career success (mostly yuppies), and upper-middle class status. These women's momentary power over each man finally gives way to the decisive domination of the male "survivor" who gets to pick his favorite date among the team of beautiful nouveaux riches so eager to marry themselves off.

The images of the women consumers with romance-saturated and materialistic lifestyle, both fictional and real, speak to the pervasive power of globalizing consumerist ideologies that create a façade of female empowerment in the local contexts. This author posits that the illusory freedom that modern Chinese women enjoy manifests the postfemininist mentality that is interwoven with consumerist values. Conceptualized within Western feminist scholarship, the loaded label of "postfeminism" implies a strategic divorce from the second-wave feminist movement, based upon the postulation that the political goal of women's advancement has been achieved as their material needs are met (Vavrus, 1998). Sex and the City's heroines Carrie, Charlotte, Miranda, and Samantha iconize postfeminist women in the West. In the Chinese contexts, the postfeminist mentality aligns well with the rhetoric of the post-Mao importation of capitalist market economy. The postfeminist icons in the chic lit Shanghai Baby and the reality TV show Fei Cheng Wu Rao seem to attest to the achievement of Mao's feminist ambition for women "holding half of the sky" (Barret, 1973, p. 193). Then, the postfeminist sentiment misleadingly suggests that the current generation of women, the grownups of the one-child families, can veer away from the long-past political agendas of their mothers and grandmothers. In this regard, the postfemininst mentality conveniently justifies modern women's indulgence in China's burgeoning consumer culture but also legitimizes gendered consumption of woman-centered products and services-- wedding packages as a case in point. As feminist scholars have eloquently argued, postfeminism, as a supposedly liberating label, is tainted with the ideological turpitude of concealing gender inequality (Arthurs, 2003; Goldman, Heath, & Smith, 1991; Hains, 2009; Stillion-Southard, 2008; Luo, 2012a; Vavrus, 2000). Indeed, the seemingly empowered postfeminist female subject indexes a trivialization of women's political lives and a truncated development of their collective critical consciousness on the one hand. On the other hand, the same female subject, with her consumerist agency, symbolizes a divisive social force, as she is supposed to represent the privileged, the educated, the upper-middle class, and the

"haves" in the consumer culture (Luo, 2012a).

The postfeminist mentality, along with the rhetoric of consumerist agency, becomes the hotbed wherein oppressive gender politics spawn. Against the historical forces of the economy reform and the socio-cultural backdrop of globalizing consumerism, China's wedding industry has bourgeoned into a multibillion USD conglomerate, pandering to the newly acquired expectations of women of the "1980s generation," (the so-called "ba ling hou") who, having grown up in the era of reform and globalization, are about to tie the knot. Research on Western weddings indicates that wedding enterprises expand via a synergistic blending with a plethora of industries, especially media conglomerates (Engstrom, 2008; Levine, 2005). Unsurprisingly, the Chinese wedding industry models itself after the globalizing trend. When Adrian (2003) first visited Taiwan to study the local bridal culture in the mid-1990s, she observed that beauty salons and photographic studios undertook the main tasks of styling the Taiwanese brides. Interestingly, Adrian (2003) also found that Taiwanese entrepreneurs were starting to explore the marketplace of mainland China, although the early reform era saw women mainlanders standing on the low rung of the world fashion hierarchy, yet to develop their aesthetic sensibilities. Along with the accelerating influx of global capitals, the new millennium has witnessed the small-scale aesthetic salons in mainland cities giving way to sprawling wedding corporations, which are establishing symbiotic relationships with photographing, jewelry, fashion, media, advertising, and tourist industries at home and abroad. A liaison between the local and global, annual wedding expos at regional, national, and international levels constitute an essential part of profit-generating mechanism upon which this particular industry is based. As a 2009 China Daily report perceives, even the global financial crisis failed to deter millions of Chinese newlyweds from splurging on packaged wedding services and products at the year's Beijing Wedding Expo (X. R. Chen, 2009). An average couple is reported as spending 18,500 USD on a wedding, which is estimated to be 20 times their average monthly salary (X. R. Chen, 2009). The same journalistic report points to the flourishing of joint-venture enterprises. Local photography studios join hands with those in Europe and North America. The Professional Photographers of America (PPA), for instance, has opened its office to train local wedding photographers. The honeymoon, another big fat expenditure, has acquired certain local traits in the sense that professional photographers accompany the couple along their trip to shoot bridal portraits at the memorable spots of exotic locales (X. R. Chen, 2009). Given that the 2009 Wedding Expo gives a glimpse of the industry at the time of global economic downturn, the 2012 Expo in Beijing reports that 10 million couples tie the knot annually, thus generating a total of 63 billion USD from across the country (*Women of China*, 2012). Such statistics herald China's vastly increased marketplace, expanding as if it knew no bounds, as well as the country's wedding synergism that is ascending to the pinnacle of its kinds across the globe.

In sum, the intertwining neoliberal values of consumerist agency and the mentality of postfemism promote the rapid growth of the wedding industry in mainland China, which naturalizes its establishment as a bride-centered conglomerate, not only openly sharing the country's consumer cornucopia, but also implicitly regimenting women's bodies and their positions in marriage and love.

Through the Lens of Semiotics

Since it is not feasible to examine the industry in its totality, this research focuses on analyzing the bridal magazines widely circulated in China's consumer culture. More specifically, selected print issues (published from January, 2011 until June, 2012) and Web pages² of Zexy (Da Zhong Jie Xi), Modern Brides (Xin Niang), Today Brides (Jin Ri Xin Niang), and Goinlove.com (Shi Shang Hun Qing Wang) are used as the corpus of the textual examination. As these magazines (except for Goinlove.com, which is a wedding consultation Web site) are all monthly periodicals with an average of 200 pages in each print issue, this author read through more than 10,000 pages of magazine texts.

The analysis of the bridal magazine texts was approached through the

² The Web sites of these bridal publications are: Zexy (Da Zhong Jie Xi): http://www.zexy.com.cn; Modern Brides (Xin Niang): http://www.brides.com.cn; Today Brides (Jin Ri Xin Niang): http://www.todaybrides.com; Goinlove.com (Shi Shang Hun Qing Wang): http://www.goinlove.com. These bridal publications are written in Chinese but include the English translations of their names. Literally, Xin Niang magazine should be translated as Brides instead of Modern Brides. Such a mistranslation might be deliberate to better reflect the contents of the magazine.

methodological framework of semiotics. The value of semiotics for this study is its ability to place a text within a larger system of cultural representations. From this perspective, it is not the text itself as much as it is the decoded meaning of that text that is important to understand. Barthes (1972) believes that meanings can be analyzed, based upon two orders of signification. The first level refers to denotation, a surface understanding that describes the "direct, specific meaning we get from a sign" (Berger, 1989, p. 48). This level constitutes the simple, basic, descriptive level of a sign, where "consensus is wide and most people would agree on the meaning" (Hall, 1997, p. 38). The second level consists of connotation, usually in the form of myths and symbols, which go beyond the surface understanding of the denotative level. Connotation involves an interpretation of contexts, such as the surrounding culture and symbolism. The signifiers that have been decoded at the denotative level through the use of "conventional classifications" enter wider and more sophisticated codes, which "link them with what we may call the wider semantic fields of our culture" (Hall, 1997, p. 38). Meanings at this level are no longer at a descriptive level of common and obvious interpretations. Instead, interpretations are connected to wider realms of social ideologies. Ultimately, connotative meanings of signs turn into, reflect, and/or reinforce, ideological myths (Berger, 1989). Barthes³ (1972) explains:

The text is indeed the creator's (and hence society's) right of inspection over the image; anchorage is control, bearing a responsibility in the face of the projective power of pictures

³ In his book Mythologies, one of Barthes' examples is the cover of the French magazine Paris Match. The picture of the magazine cover shows "a young Negro in a French uniform saluting with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on the fold of the tricolour" (Barthes, 1972, p.116, cited in Hall, 1997, p.39). According to Hall (1997), this example explicitly demonstrates the ways representation plays out not only at the denotative level, but also at the connotative level, which has a broader cultural and ideological meaning. As Hall further explains, the denotative, literal message of the cover image is "a black soldier is giving the French flag a salute" (p. 39). By contrast, the connotative, cultural message, based upon Barthes' own interpretation, may be "that France is a great Empire, and that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism that the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors" (Barthes, 1972, p.116, cited in Hall, 1997, p.39).

-for the use of the message. With respect to the liberty of the signifieds of the image, the text has thus a *repressive* value and we can see that it is at this level that the morality and ideology of a society are above all invested. (p. 40)

The author finds Barthes' s semiotic framework a useful guide to the analysis of the verbal and visual texts of the bridal magazines in that this framework allows for reading between the lines, identifying both denotative and connotative meanings of texts, and thus delving into the ideologies the texts convey, construct and/or reinforce. In this analysis, the discursive and fragmentary of portrayals of the Chinese bride and her wedding consumption constitute a microcosm of conflating consumerist and gender discourses. Special attention is paid to not only the ideological underpinnings the media texts convey, but also the power relationships that these texts negotiate and buttress. The analysis serves two purposes: 1) to understand how the globalizing practices of lavish weddings are being repackaged and sold to the local women consumers; and 2) to interrogate how the globalizing forces join hands with the local industry to recreate new forms of oppressive gender politics under the banner of consumer one-upmanship.

The Bridal Magazines: Constructing the Modern Chinese Bride

Apparently, a significant player within the wedding synergism is the media. Bridal magazines develop both print and online versions, creating a dazzling array of wedding artifacts, images, and representations for the modern Chinese bride, who is glorified in all her finery within the full bloom of the industry. Zexy (Da Zhong Jie Xi), Modern Brides (Xin Niang), Today Brides (Jin Ri Xin Niang), and Goinlove.com (Shi Shang Hun Qing Wang), stand out as the mainstay of the Chinese bridal publications, reaching multitudinous readers who can subscribe the print issues or surf the Web pages. Interestingly, the unit prices of the magazines' print editions are very low, ranging from merely 1.6 USD to 4 USD per issue. Furthermore, with a total monthly circulation of over one million print copies, these publications seem affordable to even low income readers. However, sample readings of these magazines' mission statements in-

dicate that their major target readers are the educated upper-middle class, especially those who have ascended China's new social hierarchy. For example, sm114.com.cn, one of the popular search engines of media, publicizes the current reader profile of Modern Brides (Xin Niang), which says that 92% of its readers are college graduates and that 69% of the reader population earn a monthly income of above 565 USD (3500 RMB).

These different magazines, all with their inceptions in the new millennium, share the commonality of establishing a complex web of symbiotic relationships with both local and global enterprises. Whereas Zexy (Da Zhong Jie Xi) cooperates with the Japanese Zexy publications, mutually sharing resources, Modern Brides (Xin Niang) indicates in every monthly issue that the Chinese magazine has established copyright alliance with America's Advanced Magazine Publishers, Inc, whose registered trademarks include Moden Brides, Brides, and Elegant Bride. By contrast, both Today Brides (Jin Ri Xin Niang), and Goinlove.com (Shi Shang Hun Qing Wan) focus on domestic networking, yet drawing heavily from resources about foreign wedding rituals, world fashion designs, and international brand-name commodities and services. The characteristics of media synergism are most distinctly manifested in Goinlove.com, a comprehensive wedding Web site that provides hyperlinks to wedding events, products, and services in a total of 47 major cities across mainland China. Albeit having different ownerships and joint ventures, these bridal magazines, in tandem with their Web pages, configure a kaleidoscopic collection on weddings, marriages, brides, and fashion. The chromatic magazine/Web pages, replete with photographs of shining jewelry, blooming floras, flashy fashion designs, and picturesque tourist spots, serve the function of "guiding" the modern bride through the rite of her wedding, from selecting the gown, purchasing the package consisting of professional photographers, planners, emcees, and coordinators, to deciding the honeymoon locale. However, a close semiotic reading reveals that these magazines go beyond what they claim, in their mission statements, to be consumer guides, and become identifiable power holders adapting global forces to the Chinese context and fomenting oppressive yet discursive gender discourses. More specifically, they assert their hegemonic role of normalizing the lavish wedding, constructing the "ideal" bride, and regimenting gender roles in marriage and love. Ironically, upper-middle class professional women join their male counterparts to serve on the editorial committees of these magazines. For instance, both *Modern Brides (Xin Niang)* and *Today Brides (Jin Ri Xin Niang)* have hired women editorial directors⁴. Most noticeably, a team of fashion, copyright, and art women editors works for *Modern Brides (Xin Niang)*. These women problematically take an active part in molding and perpetuating the oppressive gender regime of the media.

In the analysis, this author begins from the notion of "packaging" and further looks into the ways the magazine texts - a microcosm of China's wedding industry-repackage the trite, oppressive trope of "romantic" Western weddings into a bricolage of global fashions, lifestyles, beauty regimens, and marriage tips for the Chinese bride. The author borrows from anthropologist Lévi-Strauss (1974) the concept of "bricolage," which refers to the act of (re)creating improvised structures/objects via an appropriation of pre-existing materials ready to hand. In Lévi-Strauss's (1974) initial conception, a bricoleur, one who engages in bricolage, is "someone who works with his [her] hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman" (pp. 16-17). In other words, the performance of bricolage conveys the bricoleur's subjectivity and agency in the process of creating his/her own signification of meanings. In the Chinese case, this author posits that the local wedding industry undertakes the task of a bricoleur. However, its bricolage, pandering to women's consumerist agency, masks new forms of oppressive gender and social scripts.

Packaged Weddings for Sale

In her study of Japanese weddings, Goldstein-Gidoin (1997) uses the metaphor of "packaging" to depict the bride's passive and objectified role in the wedding:

⁴ I learn about the gender of the magazines' major employees by both looking at their names provided at the editorial pages of each monthly issue and searching their blogs (if any) via using the search engine Baidu.com. Tang Qiong works for *Today Bride* as the editorial director. Erica Yu serves as the leader of *Modern Bride's* editorship, under which, Lynn Wang and Amy Li work as fashion director, Amanda Chen as copyright editor, and Yuki Yu as art director. Interestingly, these Chinese women use their English given names, which presumably enhance the "modern" look of the publications. The main editor of *Zexy* is Luo Weiguo, a male writer from Shanghai, known for his prolific publications (Retrieve November 15, 2012 from http://baike.baidu.com/view/2465531.htm)

In the process of being packaged in her traditional-Japanese and Western packages, the modern Japanese bride is objectified by the packagers and moreover, collaborates in the objectification. Aiming to fulfill her "Cinderella Dream," she collaborates as a customer of both the wedding industry and of the products advertised for brides, and also as a woman who "puts in evidence her masters' ability to pay" (p. 134)

Interestingly, in the Chinese bridal publications examined, "packaging" seems the portal to each successful wedding. In Zexy magazine, for example, packaging literally refers to wedding formulas sold as a whole, which include six key elements: the wedding venue, the jewelry, the photographing, the costumes, the wedding design, and miscellaneous items (such as candies and party favors). Each element itself consists of layers of smaller packages. For instance, the wedding design consists of stage decorations, lighting, acoustic setting, videotaping, emcees, and bridal stylists. Zexy strategically blurs the line between providing wedding tips and advertising the wedding packages via presenting exemplars of "wedding stories" in each monthly issue. Take the January 2012 issue of Zexy for example, which depicts two contrasting wedding stories, both of which took place in Shanghai in 2011. Bride Yu's wedding adopts the theme of "Blooming," characterized by colorful, delicate paper bouquets, whereas bride Jin selects white and champagne colors for her stage to highlight the ambiance of the "Pure Love" theme. The magazine discusses the two weddings in the same format, listing their detailed schedules for each step of the ceremonies as well as the performance contents at their banquets. With a brief account about the two couples' love stories, accompanied by visual texts to presumably capture their happiest moments, the Zexy article comments on the characteristic designs of each package respectively and provides a summary table, indicating the expenditure of each procedure. Jin's wedding costs a total of 1,104,225 RMB⁵ (177, 243 USD), with the planning and designing

⁵ The bridal magazines use RMB money units to indicate the prices of the wedding packages. For the convenience of international readers, I convert the RMB money value into US dollars, using the average currency conversion rate in 2012, i.e., 1USD = 6.23RMB

service expenditure amounting to a quarter of a million RMB. Moreover, Jin splurges on her wedding venue at the Waldorf Astoria, an upscale hotel owned by Hilton so that her ceremony is immersed in a "classical ambience of Western uniqueness," as Zexy describes (Zexy, January 2012, p. 15). No doubt Jin's bridal photographing costs much more than the average studios would charge as all the photos are taken in Sydney, Australia in a special tour accompanied by a professional wedding photographer and his team of assistants. By contrast, Yu's wedding expenditure totals 226,660 RMB (36,382 USD), which also indexes a lavish wedding, albeit much less pricey than Jin's package. Yu holds an extravagant banquet that entertains 19 round tables of guests, which alone costs 120,000 RMB (19,261 USD), but she is willing to spend less on her bridal photographing via hiring a Korean studio without undertaking an oversea tour.

These two wedding exemplars are representative of what the Chinese bridal magazines promote as "ideal" wedding packages. The 24 wedding cases reported in Zexy magazine (between the January 2011 issue and the January 2012 issue) range in price approximately from 200,000 RMB (32,102 USD) to 1,000,000 RMB (160,513 USD). In comparison to Goldstein-Gidoin's (1997) discussions of the "packaging" of the Japanese bride, the notion of "packaging" in the Chinese contexts is embedded within even more complex ideological underpinnings. As Yu's and Jin's wedding experiences indicate, packaging, above all, entails various layers of commercialization that conspicuously attaches to a high price tag, signifying social and consumerist hierarchy. Furthermore, packaging entails a normalizing process that renders lavish wedding practices an unquestioned part of the expected social scripts and cultural performance. Like the Japanese bride, the Chinese bride in the magazines' depictions is objectified at the "one-stop" center (also see, Engstrom, 2008), where the "packagers" (such as photographers, stylists, wedding planners, fashion designers, jewelers, and coordinators) painstakingly prepare her for the requisite glamour of a lavishing wedding performance. However, the Chinese bride's objectification within the process of packaging is covered up by the consumer ambitions and the active social and gender roles she is expected to perform.

The reading of the bridal texts further reveals that a wedding package entails not only an array of luxurious commodities and services, but also

a blending of ideas about love and marriage, all of which have the imprints of the globalizing forces. Implicitly, the Western notion of "romantic love" is being repackaged by the local industry, through a sophisticated appropriation or even transformation, into a bricolage of supposedly new, multicultural experiences and lifestyles for the Chinese bride. Again, the highlighting of the woman's consumer agency deflects her conformity to the evolving gender scripts toward an illusory empowerment.

A Bricolage of "Romance"

In her analysis of Taiwanese bridal photographing, Adrian (2003) observes that the bridal portraits of her research informants share the common theme of "romance," a supposedly Western ideal that has conveniently become a catchphrase in the globalizing wedding industry. However, rather than actually experiencing romance, the Taiwanese couple perform romance within a few seconds under the flashing of the camera. Comparably in this present analysis, the plethora of bridal photos in the print magazines and their Web pages provide evidence that the Chinese bride is charged with the similar tasks of staging romantic love through her hairstyles, gowns, jewelry, and photographic backgrounds. She is captured with facial expressions that present her as innocent, shy, bold, flirtatious or coquettish, as if she were following a fixed acting script notwithstanding the changing backgrounds, say, of a Shanghai coffee shop, an exotic Vietnamese fresh marketplace, or an elegant Barcelonan Catholic church⁶. Such portraits bespeak "commodified romance," which, as Boden (2003) argues, can be easily achieved through materialistic consumption in contrast to marriage itself that tends to be challenging to maneuver in reality because of its "indefinable lifespan, its unpredictable scripts, and its unknown emotional journeys" (p. 122). To extend Boden's argument, the momentary romance as part of the lavish wedding rituals does not attest to a woman's actual position in her matrimony.

⁶ The examples of the Shanghai coffee shop, Vietnamese fresh marketplace, and Barcelonan Catholic church are from the bridal photos in Today Brides, April 2012 (p. 88, p. 68, and p. 63).

While the visual texts of the magazines depict the staged romance in its simplicity, the verbal texts expand the notion of "romance" into more sophisticated sensibilities of modernity. Romance in Western fantasy entails the trite tropes of Euro-American fairy-tales, say, Cinderella and Prince Charming living happily-ever-after, which fuel Western brides' dreams of being a princess in a lavish wedding (Otnes & Pleck, 2003). In the Chinese case, the imagery of Cinderella bears little resemblance to the country's distant memories of princesses and princes in the feudal dynasties and therefore might not appeal as much to the Chinese woman consumer. Romance, in the local wedding consumer market, is repackaged for sale, which the author finds has the following manifestations in the bridal magazines.

First, the notion of romance is vaguely translated into an ingenious blending of Western (or foreign) and Chinese wedding practices. For instance, Today Brides (April 2012) depicts the wedding of Shou Kan (the groom) and Wei Yi (the bride) as imbued with "romantic love." The couple from Hangzhou are said to have fallen in love at the first sight. Shou realizes that Wei is the woman he has been awaiting his whole life. He takes her to the seaside on a moonlit, starry night, kneels in front of her, and gives her the ring. With the help of a posse of wedding professionals, they hold their wedding ceremony at a Western coffee shop named "Soft Time" owned by the bride, which, as the narrative goes, is harmoniously integrated into Chinese elements such as the use of crimson silk and paper parasols as decorations. The bride wears the bright red Cheongsam and follows the local tradition of wrapping herself in a red comforter - a gesture of good luck - before leaving for her ceremony. As the camera shows, in her Cheongsam, the bride also serves tea and bows to her parents-in-law, adhering to another local tradition. She then changes into a milky Western-style wedding gown for the actual ceremony in which the couple takes wedding vows, surrounded by floating soap bubbles and under the deep red parasols hanging from the ceiling of the coffee shop. The magazine article valorizes the couple's ingenious selections of wedding locale, theme, and colors, all of which symbolize their marriage as "matching and inseparable as coffee and milk" (Today Brides, April 2012, pp. 88-89). In this example, the magazine turns a cliché Western- style wedding proposal into an innovative Chinese wedding, a process that oozes romantic sentiments for

emulation and for sale.

Second, the experience of romance is mingled with the new experience of the so-called "individualized," "customized," or "DIY" wedding package, which the bridal industry sells in particular. In an article titled "The Individualized Package: Creating the For-You-Only Wedding," Modern Brides (June 2012) advocates that the new generations born in the 1980s and the 1990s follow the vogue of customizing and individualizing their weddings. To avoid a lackluster, homogenous wedding, the article presents a team of wedding experts' professional suggestions on how to plan a unique, and romantic wedding through "individualized photographing," "theme-based ceremony," "customized flora arrangement," and "personalized invitation card design" (Modern Brides, June 2012, pp. 48-53). The thus-labeled "individualized photographing" refers, according to the Chinese photographer in the article, to a photo-shooting process that resembles a movie-shooting routine. With detailed acting scripts, each shoot is treated as the making of a special scene in a movie. Each pose is designed based upon the couple's characters rather than merely their looks. The portraits are to capture and frame their happiness. As for a "theme-based" ceremony, the experts advocate drawing inspirations from the couple's personal growth, love stories, and idiosyncratic hobbies. An environment-conscious bride, for example, can highlight both her romantic love and her love for the environment via using recyclable materials and green plants as her major ambience decorations. "DIY" stands out as another buzzword in the individualized, fashionable, and expensive wedding package. It turns out that "DIY" loses its actual meanings of "Do It Yourself" in the local contexts because the couple is only encouraged to do the minimum such as selecting the colors and designs of their invitation cards. As this magazine article reflects, the notion of romance is ingeniously integrated into imbrications of other imported catchphrases, which seem irresistible to the local bride, who indulges in the opulent consumption of Vera Wang wedding gowns, Tiffany jewelry, Roger Vivier stilettos, Barcelonan photo shooting, as well as the globalizing ideals of theme-based, individualized, and even DIY wedding designs. Of course, romantic love and the staging of it all come with a high price that can fortify the social hierarchy of the bride and the family she marries into. Finally, the sentiment of romance is conveyed in the romance-satu-

rated commercials that are an integral part of these bridal magazines. Every monthly issue of Modern Brides, for instance, entails a series of elaborate advertisements that sell a variety of domestic and foreign brand jewelry including earrings, bracelets, rings, necklaces, and pendants by Chaumet Le Grand, Moneta, Tiffany & Co Garden, and Bulgari to name but a few. These ads portray a jewelry- adorned bride as if in the epiphany of her femininity: she has delicate, porcelain facial skin, with any signs of flaws masked by refined layers of cosmetics; she has symmetrically trimmed and painted eyebrows and shining eyes to communicate her romantic feelings; she has rosy, moist lips; she smiles to subtly convey her happiness; and her whole image radiates feminine beauty, with her gown, veil, and hairstyle a perfect match for every piece of jewelry she wears. While such visual portrayals only vaguely connote the woman's femininity, the narratives create scenarios that metaphorically link the feminine role with the performance of romance. Below are the author's translations of two symptomatic scenarios these ads conjure up:

1) A Story of the Dragonfly

Do you remember the girl who loved to laugh? In the summer evenings, she sat in a flowery field, counting dragonflies. She wished she could have a pair of wings, flying as freely as the dragonflies. Since then, the boy has been dreaming about that field full of flowers. Years later, the bride smiles as the girl who counted dragonflies puts on the boy's gift: a piece of necklace with a dragonfly-shaped pendant, with the special name of "Dragonfly Above The Flowery Field."

--An ad that sells Tiffany& Co Garden series gold flower-shaped pendants, dragonfly-shaped pendants, diamond rings, Tiffany 18K gold earrings, and 18K rose gold and silver bracelets. (*Modern Brides*, March 2012, p. 88)

2) Rose's Statements

Rose fell in love with rose flowers at 16. At that age, she felt that the fragrance of roses suggested love. At 20, she bought only roses. At that age, she felt that only red color roses could express her passion. At 22, she received her first bouquet of roses. At 25, she was hurt by the thorn of roses. It was the first time that she disliked roses. At 28,

her wedding is filled with roses. Rose is her name and her love. --An ad that sells Moneta flower series necklace, bracelets, and rings. (Modern Brides, March 2012, p. 89)

Such poetic, creative, and, again, romance-saturated narratives metaphorically depict both the bride and the jewelry that decorates her. In these accounts, the empty signifiers of "romantic love" have been refilled with new meanings: from fortuitous yet fateful encounters, mutual attractions, to faithful commitments, all as if dependent upon the abundance of the burgeoning consumer culture. The commercial depictions of the lovesick bride indicates that both social and gender roles of the woman consumer ironically undergo a fixation against the backdrop of her consumer freedom.

The 'Nen" Bride and Her Beauty Regimens

In her study of gender and body politics in postmillennial China, Yang (2011) notes that nennü and shunü, the two conflating gendered representations, become the powerful drive of China's beauty economy, which thrives on the expediting consumption of cosmetics, fashion, beautification, and health care products and services at the local consumer culture. As Yang (2011) explains, nennii is translated into the literal meaning of "tender, younger women with feminine youth" in contrast to shunü that indexes "ripe, older women with feminine maturity" (p. 334). As "nen" and "shu" in Chinese language literally refer to the varying degrees of maturity of fruits, argues Yang (2011), these particular expressions, when used to depict women, metaphorically connote the presence of a "tasting male subject" who enjoys an oppressive discourse of female "exoticism and sexuality" (p. 335). Yang's (2011) research also reveals the self-disciplining effects of these two expressions on women consumers themselves. Indeed, the prosperity of such trades as cosmetics, beauty salon services, and cosmetic surgery suggests the telltale anxiety of "ripe women" (shunii) to engage in beautification regimens so as to have the physiques and demeanors of "tender women" (nennii). In this regard, the discourses surrounding nennii and shunii, so quietly entering the everyday expressions of the consumer marketplace, grant a glimpse of the intertwining gender and body politics that implicitly reinforce male dominance in postsocialist China.

The bridal magazines, as part of the major purveyors of consumerist values and gender ideologies, disseminate the *nennii* and *shunii* messages in the name of beautifying the bride for a "perfect" wedding. In an article entitled "Nen' Brides: 2012 Age Reduction Strategies for Brides," *Zexy* magazine blatantly advocates:

Women forever wish they could be 10 years younger. For those brides-to-be, whatever [bridal] styles they would prefer, they most likely expect to be made-up as "nen." Our article therefore reveals the secret weapon for "age reduction" for brides through their makeup, hairdos, and wedding gowns so that even *shu* brides could be as *nen* as possible. (*Zexy*, January 2012, p. 43)

Then, both the visual and verbal texts painstakingly teach a series of rigid beauty regimens that a bride is supposed to undergo to appear young and tender-- the thus labeled "nenü." All these regimens produce the "ideal" Chinese bride who looks homogeneous to her counterparts. As the magazine article depicts, the nen bride needs the requisite beautification routines, for example: 1) the use of pink foundation to make her face appear as gentle and refreshing as cherry blossoms; 2) the application of peach color lip gloss to make her lips full and juicy; 3) the specialization of eye and eyebrow treatments to render her whole face radiating like a blooming flower; 4) the maintenance of a cascade of long, curled hair decorated with pink flowers to highlight her rosy cheeks; and 5) the selection of hairpins, tiaras, or butterfly hair bands to turn her into a cute, sweet princess (Zexy, January 2012, pp. 43-49). The article continues on with its repertoire of so-called "age-reducing beauty tips." However, even the above truncated list translated sheds clear light on an insidiously oppressive process that prepares not only for the bride's normative performance of a lavish wedding, but also for the groom's consumption of the sexualized body of his would-be wife. The derogatory connotations of nennii and shunii are masked by the wedding industry as beauty standards that entice women consumers to splurge on cosmetic commodities while simultaneously disciplining their

bodies so as to conform to the normative femininity constructed by the confluence of local and global hegemony.

Engstrom (2008) eloquently criticizes The Knot, the dominant U.S. bridal media, for their spread of hegemonic messages. Engstrom (2008) exposes the gender oppression underlying the Western bride's passive position as a "physical object" (p. 68) and the raison d'être of displaying her physical beauty and femininity in a one-day-only spectacle. Borrowing from Engstrom's (2008) critique, this author further posits, based upon an analysis of the Chinese bridal publications, that the hegemonic control over the bride's body is becoming a transnational stigma. In the Chinese case, such hegemonic forces foray into marketing strategies that promote the supposedly modern lifestyle and new cultural experience, which in turn conceal the patriarchal domination at the local consumer marketplace. The selling of every piece of luxurious bridal accoutrement, though seemingly introducing a new consumer experience, points to a "male gaze" in Mulvey's (1989) term. For instance, the Chinese bride is encouraged to try on the Yumi Katsura Paris wedding gown, which is said to signify the pinnacle of the Haute Couture world fashion hierarchy. As the Zexy magazine introduces, Yumi Katsura, the renowned Japanese fashion designer, is specialized in integrating the world popular "3S" style (i.e. "Simple," "Sexy," and Slender") into the elements of Japanese kimono costumes, thus creating her own unique and ideal combination of "Western romance" with "Eastern elegance" (Modern Brides, March 2012, p. 75). Thus, the curvaceous and slender body of the Chinese bride in a Yumi Katrura Paris gown, apparently appeals much more to her own gaze and vanity. In these bridal media texts, this author also finds that the selling of expensive bridal accoutrements and cosmetics is being extended to the advertising of what the magazines call "micro-cosmetic surgery procedures" (Zexy, January 2012, p. 25). In the same issue of Zexy that advocates the "nen" bride, another article claims to provide the "best secret formula" for an instant transformation of a bride's facial contour and skin quality. This "formula" actually contains expensive and risky cosmetic procedures of injecting doses of Hyaluronic acid, collagen, and even BOTOX into women's bodies so as to "increase the elasticity of the skin texture, slow down the aging process, and improve the facial flaw" (Zexy, January 2012, p. 25). While the magazine comforts the bride who is worried

about her "not so perfect face" via offering tips of new technological beautification, it bespeaks the wedding industry's problematic contribution to the increasing popularity of cosmetic surgery consumption by mainland Chinese women (Luo, 2012b). This particular magazine article, albeit in a condensed fashion, sheds light on the subtle yet powerful ways in which the marketing advocacy of bridal commodities creates both beauty regimens and oppressive social and gender scripts that prey on the body of the Chinese bride.

The Wedding and Marriage "Expert" and Self-Subjugation Tips

Whereas beauty regimens permeate the media texts of China's wedding industry, reinforcing the normative femininity of the Chinese bride, another set of rules surface in this analysis that impose patriarchal power over the bride's gender roles. More specifically, it is found that the bridal publications go beyond advertising bridal commodities and assume the questionable role of the wedding and marriage "expert." Such media texts provide extensive suggestions on how to be not only the "perfect bride" but also the "ideal wife." Goinlove.com, a well-acclaimed wedding consultation Web site, dominates the cyberspace of China's wedding market. Anchored to four focal themes "Wedding," "Bride," "Lady," and "Fashion," this Web site constitutes a reservoir of "how to behave" tips for brides-to-be, ranging from "how to select a wedding planner," "how to shop in a wedding expo," "how to be a fashionable bride," "how to be a satisfactory daughter-in-law," to "how to be an ideal wife" (Goinlove.com, 2012). Among a profusion of tips on how to manage a marriage life, a prominent editorial titled "How to Deal with Your Married Man" stands out. It lists ten pieces of advice that a newly married woman is expected to attend to when she faces a new husband and finds (as the article predicts) that the "hidden sides" of him surface after they have passed their romantic dating stage. Here are some highlights⁷ from this piece.

⁷ I am not translating the lengthy tips word by word. Rather, I am translating the major ideas as accurately as possible.

- Tip #1: The more you love him, the more devoted he is to you. Therefore, be prepared for being a wife as your lifelong profession.
- Tip #2: Be tolerant of your man's flaws and errors and welcome him back with open arms in both his times of success and failure.
- Tip #3: Be clean and hygienic. Although your man can be lazy and dirty himself, he cannot tolerate a messy home and a careless wife.
- Tip #4: Let your man have the title of your household's master and thus maintain his face and dignity.
- Tip #5: Understand your man's fear of loneliness and don't let him lose track of you.
- Tip #6: Don't expect your man to be consistent inside and outside your home because he needs to be extra polite with others for socializing purposes.
- Tip #7: Don't challenge your man when he throws a tantrum. After all, your man undergoes a great deal of social pressure and challenges a woman has never experienced.
- Tip #8: Understand your man's jealousy and tell him about your interactions with your male friends, which is an effective means to show your care and monitor your own conducts, as well.
- Tip #9: Keep your family problems to yourself and protect your man's ego.
- Tip #10: Don't compare your husband with other women's husbands because such comparison indicates your betrayal of your own man and family. (Retrieved July 15, 2012, from http://www.goinlove.com/news/onews.asp?id=2032)

Noticeably, such advice addresses the new wife as "you," a textual strategy identified by Althusser (1971) as "interpellation," which "occurs

when a text hails or summons an individual as a concrete subject within an ideological framework" (cited in Gribble, 1997, p. 23). In other words, when the woman reader is interpellated by these particular messages, she recognizes that she is being hailed and unconsciously internalizes the oppressive gender ideologies these texts convey. Proliferated through Internet media, these messages become even more pervasive and discursive, as this author notes that the Web designs allow for easy transmissions of every piece of online text to personal emails and blogs, accessible to numerous readers. Very blatantly, this exemplary list of "tips" exerts the hegemonic power of regulating husband-wife relationships. The bride, the would-be wife, is instilled with the patriarchal norms of being self-subjugated to the subordinate position in her matrimony. On the whole, these "how to behave" indoctrinations reveal an image of the subordinate Chinese bride, which adds so much dissonance to the glamorous, picture-perfect bride in a lavish wedding, so imbued with consumerist agency and postfeminist sensibilities. The findings here concur with Adrian's (2003) query about the "once-in-a lifetime" cultural logic underlying a spectacle of a wedding performance. As Adrian (2003) explains, beneath the bride's once-in-a-lifetime glory on her wedding day lies the precarious reasoning that a decline in the woman's outlook and lifestyle ensues and that she has to sacrifice herself in marriage and devote herself to familial responsibilities after the rite of her wedding passage. In this regard, the self-subjugation tips herald a reverse of power relations soon after the bride's momentary dominance on her wedding day. Notwithstanding her materialistic indulgence in her "big fat wedding," the modern Chinese bride neither escapes from the gender scripts of Chinese society nor celebrates a significant enhancement of her status in her matrimony.

Concluding Remarks

The bridal publications constitute a fascinating cultural terrain, in which the diversification of Chinese women's cultural experience goes hand in hand with the rigid re-inscription of their gender roles. As this analysis shows, the magazine texts present a microcosmic picture of China's wedding media conglomerations, which exert hegemonic control over women consumers via tapping into such globalizing forces as neo-

liberal values of agency and postfeminist mentality. Importantly, this article unravels the intricate ways the media texts construct the imagery of the modern Chinese bride, who appears as if she enjoys the best offered by the confluence of local and global consumerist prosperities. The extravagant wedding rituals, the exorbitant bricolage of romance, and the pricey beautification commodities and technologies are repackaged for the achievement of the ideal of consumer one-upmanship. But the lavish wedding packages represent the synecdoche of an ongoing process, in which the globalizing forces join hands with the local systems in regimenting local women's bodies, and recreating patriarchal social and gender scripts that are detrimental to women's efforts to achieve equality in marriage and love.

Through analyzing the media images of the modern Chinese bride, this study opens up further research on the social realities of matrimony and love in China's globalizing consumer culture. Within the scope of textual analysis, this article has not yet explored beyond the representational terrain. Being an insider of Chinese culture, the author is well aware of what has been left out of bridal publications' depictions of the glamorous bride. As Chen (2003) implies in his journalistic report titled "A Match Made in Heaven, If You Have Enough Yuan," China's development of market economy witnesses the ever-increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots. One social phenomenon that signifies such a gap is that migrant laborers from the rural areas attempt to seek economic advancement in cosmopolitan cities only to find low income positions. Among the influx of rural labor forces are the lower-class, rural young women who search for love and marriage in cities in hope of "marrying up," so to speak, but end up being taken advantage of or even abused by comfortably well-off urban men, according to a news report in Women of China (2007), the official publication by All China Women's Federation. The scene of women migrants struggling outside the door to marriage strikes a discord into lavish wedding showcases in China's mediascape. Another social phenomenon that also raises concerns about Chinese women's status in their matrimony is referred as "Bao Ernai" (China Daily, 2000), which literally means "raising mistresses" on the part of unfaithful husbands who become wealthy and desire extramarital affairs to signify the emergence of what Zheng (2012) calls "entrepreneurial masculinity" in China's postsocialist marketplace (p. 45). Furthermore, women's disempowerment in their love and marriage lives surfaces in the widespread reality TV dating shows such as Fei Cheng Wu Rao (If You Are the One), and Wo Men Yue Hui Ba (Lets Date). These shows depict the upper-middle class, postfeminist women eagerly jumping onto the marry-yourself-off bandwagon while those being left-behind are called "shengnü" ("leftover women"), a label imbued with gender inequality. In sum, the juxtaposition of the modern Chinese bride, in her packaged glamour, and her less-fortunate counterparts falling out of the grand wedding performance, calls for further interrogation of the intertwining social and gender oppression concealed beneath the veneer of consumerist prosperities.

Whereas this paper magnifies the role of the local industry as the dexterous bricoleur, especially in its textual construction of the modern bride, it has not yet examined women consumers' subjectivities in being or becoming bricoleurs who create their own signified meanings through the consumption of wedding products, services, and media. As globalization scholars point out, while local consumers desire global products and emulate global consumption behaviors, they neither abandon their own culture, tradition, or heritage, nor do they become passive receivers of global ideas (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Featherstone & Lash, 1995; Roberston, 1995). Rather, such consumers exert "the power to adapt, innovate, and maneuver within a glocalized world" (Ritzer, 2004, p. 77). In this regard, this analysis points to future discussions on the reception end of the wedding industry through looking into Chinese brides' unique, personal perspectives.

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Appendix

The basic information of the bridal magazines (print issues) used for my analysis:

Magazine	Publisher	Editorial Director/Leader	Target Readership	Approximate Monthly Circulation(Per Issue)	Unit Price (Per Issue)
Zexy (Da Zhong Jie Xi)	Shanghai Century Publishing Corporation Ltd. —Far East Publishing House		upper-middle class newly weds or couples about to tie the knot (would-be brides at home and abroad in particular)	16,000 copies circulated in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou; the number of circulation in other cities unknown	10 RMB (1.6 USD)
Modern Brides (Xin Niang)	China Council for the Promotion of International Trade		upper-middle class newly weds or couples about to tie the knot (would-be brides at home and abroad in particular)	480,000 copies at national circulation	25 RMB (4 USD)
Today Brides (Jin Ri Xin Niang)	Newspaper & Magazine Development Center of Sichuan Province	Ms. Tang Qiong	uppermiddle class newly weds or couples about to tie the knot (would-be brides hailing from various regions of mainland China)	360,000 copies at national circulation	20 RMB (3.2 USD)

- Note: 1) The above information is gathered from the magazines' editorial pages as well as from the following websites, Retrieved on November 15, 2012: http://www.sm114.com.cn/s/ magazine/124608893.html; http://douban.com/group/xinniang; http://www.zubunet.co m/site/magazineissue/28138.html; http://baike.baidu.com/view/2465531.htm; http://w ww.baiju.org/weibo/34577.html
 - 2) While the circulation of these magazines' print editions does not appear large, their electronic editions should draw a much greater number of readers who have Internet access, without having to pay subscription fees.