

001112 Wedding Bells

On Saturday, I attended the wedding of one of the teachers at my school. The teacher's name is Zhong Da (in China, the family name comes first, so Da is his given name) and he works in the school office and speaks excellent English. We have been friends since I first arrived in Yantai. I have written a little about weddings in past emails, but never based on a first hand account. So, I can now tell you what a wedding in Yantai can be like. However, I don't know if this wedding was very typical or what people do outside of Yantai.

The wedding was to start at 11:30 AM at a nearby hotel. Saturday was chosen as it is a very lucky day and you should only get married on a lucky day. In the Roman calendar, the date had a repeating 11 which is lucky. I can not remember the date in the lunar calendar, but it had lots of 6's, 0's and other lucky numbers in it. So as I and the other guests waited on the steps outside of the Finance Hotel for the couple to arrive, we could see other wedding caravans passing on the main road.

For the couple the road to marriage actually begins months in advance when they register with the government. In the eyes of the government, the couple is married, but they will wait till after the wedding ceremony to call themselves so. On the morning of the ceremony, they get ready by heading to one of the many wedding stores. There, the bride will have her makeup and hair done and change into the rented wedding dress. The couple will be picked up by the wedding caravan for a few pictures at a popular spot. In Yantai, the spot to have pictures taken is Moon Beach where there is a cement statue of the moon, erected on a small peninsula. The wedding caravan that the couple travels by is led by a minivan. In the minivan is the crew filming the video as well as any other photographers. The back of the van is open so that the crew can film on route. The van is followed by three or four cars decorated with flowers. The flowers are taped onto the cars with the lead car usually having a big bouquet on the hood. The lead car gets the bouquet because it is the one in which the couple will travel.

So, the other guests and I waited on the stairs of the hotel for our wedding party to arrive. On the sidewalk in front of the hotel was an inflatable, red arch with characters written on it. The inflatable arch is very popular not only at weddings, but also for other special occasions such as holidays or store openings. The crowd also had an arch of helium balloons tied together. To the right of the arch was a small band including a keyboard, some horns and some drums. The band began to play as the couple's car pulled up before the arch. The groom got out first and went to the other side of the car to help his bride out. The couple was showered with confetti and crazy-string by a few people in the crowd. A few pictures were taken including one of the couple releasing the balloon arch into the sky before heading into the hotel.

The bride wore a white dress, identical to one that a bride in the US might wear. She also wore a white shawl, as it was very cold out as well as a white veil. Zhong Da wore a blue suit, as did some of the guests. There was not a wedding party as you might think of one in the US with women in bridesmaid dresses and men in tuxedos. I know that there is a maid of honor and a best man because I have Chinese friends who have had these roles in other weddings. But, there was nothing distinct about any of the guests that made me sure of who they were. Some male guests wore collared shirts and some of the women wore dresses or just shirts with jeans. A lot of the

guests were teachers from my school who had come over directly after classes had ended.

The wedding took place in a large hall with a stage on one end. Arrayed around the room were maybe twenty tables of about ten people each. The guests looked at a large, red paper at the hall entranceway to determine at which table they were to sit. I sat with several other teachers from my school including two English teachers; undoubtedly arranged so that I would have someone to talk with in English, which was nice of Zhong Da.

Once the guests were settled, a teacher who was to be the MC got up on stage with the couple. He started by asking a few humorous questions such as for advice on how to find such a beautiful and friendly bride. The couple also reenacted the proposal, which had occurred while they were watching Titanic. It was all pretty funny. I was informed by the teachers that Zhong Da and his wife through an introduction which is very common in Yantai. The bride works as a nurse at the Yantai Shan Hospital.

After about fifteen minutes of banter, the couple moved to the side and their parents came up and sat on the opposite side. Next, Party Secretary Hoe from my school went up on stage. In her hands she had a document in a red cover. She read the document which was loosely translated for me as a proclamation that the couple was married. Party Secretary Hoe read the document because she is the government leader at the groom's place of work. If he worked at a factory, the government leader at the factory would be reading the document. The teachers told me that it is like the minister proclaiming that the couple was now man and wife.

The document was given to the couple and a series of bows came next. The couple bowed three times to their parents, three times towards the guests and then three times towards each other. A teacher explained that in a traditional wedding, the couple would bow first to their parents, then to heaven, then to earth and lastly to each other. However, this couple did not follow that tradition. Next, the groom's father said a few words. Then the couple shared a toast on stage as the MC directed them into an intertwined position to drink. The toast ended the ceremony and the banquet began.

The rest of the wedding was the banquet. I had thought that there might be dancing, but there was only eating and a lot of it. The dinner started with wedding cake which we ate with chopsticks. This was done by pinching off bite-sized pieces with the chopsticks before bringing the piece to your mouth. Doing so without spinning the cake and sending frosting flying is not an easy task. The dinner included lots of dishes such as chicken, sea cucumbers, shrimp soup, shrimps, basa pinguo, spinach, and so many others.

As the guests ate, the couple made their way from table to table to greet and toast the guests. During the course of the dinner, the bride changes her dress three times. At first I did not realize that she had and I mistook her for a bridesmaid. The second dress was similar to the first, but red which is a lucky and traditional color. The second dress was a traditional Chinese dress. I never saw the third dress as she did not change for the third time until long after most of the guests including myself had left. I asked the teachers why she changed and they said that they did not know the reason, but it was a tradition. All of the dresses were rented from the wedding store where the wedding pictures were also taken.

Guests do not bring gifts to the wedding or send them to the couple as they would in the US. Instead, guests are given a red envelope along with the red invitation. The red envelope is for a gift of money to be given to the couple.

Well, that was the wedding in a nutshell. I had a really good time and I was very excited to be able to go to a wedding here to experience one first hand.

English Corner

A popular topic at the English Corner as well as my adult classes has been the election. I am sure that you are all tired of the debate by now, but people here are very curious about what is going on. Fortunately, I was glued to my short-wave on Wednesday afternoon (Tuesday night your time) to hear the results and the commentary. I listened mostly to the BBC and to VOA. Both had a lot of very useful information as they are directed to audiences who may not know a lot about the US political system. I actually learned some things that I did not know and in such a way that it was easy to share this knowledge with people who speak English as a second language.

The BBC also has a daily summary of the headlines from major newspapers in Asia, which is very insightful as to what is occurring elsewhere in the world. On Wednesday and Thursday, the election dominated the coverage. However, the main stories are now about other issues. I can also pick up Radio Free Japan, Radio Free Australia, Radio Free Asia, and English stations from Russia and China. The signals are not always very clear and I never know where to find the stations as they change frequencies throughout the day, but it is fun to listen if I can find them. It is really interesting to get the news from a different perspective other than from the US media.

I don't need a refrigerator any longer.

Yes, the cold winds are now blowing down from Siberia sending Northern China into a cold wave. My room has now dropped down into the high 40's as the heat has yet to be turned on. So, I wear a lot more clothing and sleep with a hat on once more. Fortunately, I have an electric pad which keeps me warm. The extra layers are how people here cope with the cold. On National Day, October 1st, the layers of long underwear went back on. It was amazing, I mean everyone was wearing their long underwear the next day, despite the temperatures still being in the 70's. I would still wear shorts and a sweatshirt or pants and a short-sleeved shirt and people would keep asking me if I were not cold. The best was when I would wear a jacket to class and take it off as I get hot while teaching. The class would "ohh" in unison as I exposed my bare arms because I was not following the rule that you must dress warmly after the holiday. Other teachers experienced this as well and it is really unnerving when your whole class ohh's you. At first I kept wondering if I had something on me or if my fly was down or something. But, the exclamations have now stopped as I am dressed just as warmly as my students.

That is it for now. Take care,

Jeff

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