

XII



Xu Guo Finds a Wife

Xu Tan sits in his dimly lit house on a busy village lane. A farmer with close-cropped hair and a face burned brown from long hours under the sun, Xu is surrounded by the new furniture he recently purchased for his son and the woman he will marry next week. There's a new bed with a canopy, a dresser, a small couch, and two chairs.

His son and his new wife will live with him and his wife in the family's home in Long Wan. After marriage, a village son usually lives with his parents while a daughter departs to live with her husband's family.

In the last few weeks, Xu has been busy preparing for the wedding feast. After the couple completes the paperwork at the county marriage office, they will return to the family's Long Wan home for the marriage feast, he says. Family members and neighbors will be invited to the daylong event.

The bride, Chen Mei Ying, is 23 years old and comes from a village about 20 kilometers from Long Wan. The groom, Xu Guo, is a 23-year-old farmer.

Long Wan men generally seek wives from nearby villages, considering marriage to a woman in the same village a form of inbreeding.

Xu says a friend of his introduced the two young people to each other. After their introduction, they began to meet to see how well they could get along. Not long after they began to meet, Xu asked his son if he wanted to marry Chen Mei Ying, and his son said he wanted to marry her.

Xu says he didn't want his son to marry her just to please him. It was up to him to make the decision, he says. He didn't want to pressure him into marrying the girl.

Once his son agreed to the marriage, Xu immediately began to make preparations for the wedding. He allowed his son to decide if he wanted to marry Chen Mei Ying, but he would decide when the wedding would take place.

He and the girl's parents met to work out the details of the marriage. Using the lunar calendar to select a day, they decided on May 11 (June 8 by the solar calendar) because an astrologer from a nearby village said it was an auspicious day.

They asked an astrologer if the boy and girl were compatible, and the astrologer concluded they were after reviewing their date and time of birth.

When Xu Tan met with Chen Mei Ying's parents they discussed other details of the marriage, such as the need for the couple to go to the Xiang office to fill out the appropriate documents. A marriage counselor there would make sure that neither had been married before and that both were old enough to get married (a woman must be at least 20 years old and a man at least 22). The couple would also need to go to the hospital to have a physical exam.

Finally, the families needed to work out details of the marriage feast, including what the guests would eat and drink and who would attend. About 300 family members and neighbors would be invited to the daylong event at the home of the boy's family. The festivities would start at noon and end at about midnight.

Each table would have 10 plates and cost the father about 100 yuan. The food would cost him about 3,000 yuan.

This is a huge sum for a village family, whose annual income is generally

only a few thousand yuan. The couple's new furniture adds to the expense so that the wedding in total will cost Xu Tan about 10,000 yuan, which is about the cost of building a new house.

Xu Tan says he is using money he has saved or borrowed to finance his son's wedding. Village weddings are becoming increasingly expensive, imposing new pressures on boys whose families may not be able to afford an elaborate wedding. A woman's parents will search for a husband who can provide their daughter with a decent wedding and a comfortable living situation.

Unlike a western wedding in which religion plays an important role, the village wedding does not include a religious ceremony. Xu says he may send someone to the village ancestral temple to pray for the couple's good luck, but that is all.

When Chen Mei Ying woke up this morning, her family gave her special attention. Her sister brought her water for washing and helped her get dressed. Last night her mother took her aside and spoke to her about marriage. She told her to always obey her husband's parents and try hard to avoid quarrelling with other members of her husband's family. She told me how to live a happy life, she says.

By the time she finished dressing, her future husband and two of his friends had arrived at the house in a car they'd hired in Zhanjiang. They picked up Chen Mei Ying and drove her to Long Wan for the wedding feast.

Her mother and father did not go to Long Wan with her to take part in the wedding feast. Three days later, Chen Mei Ying and her husband will return to her home village with a cake and a live chicken to attend a second marriage feast for the woman's family.

It's a warm June day and the lane to Xu Tan's house is bustling. Cooks work busily over huge steaming woks set up on the grass along the lane, furiously stir-frying meat, fish, and vegetable dishes.

Firecrackers explode near the entrance to the courtyard, enveloping the house in a cloud of smoke. The boom of firecrackers scares away mischievous ghosts that may have followed the bride to Long Wan.

Slowly the wedding guests start to arrive and fill up the tables set up in the courtyard of the Xu family's home. Dishes are prepared outside the house and carried to the guests seated at the tables. Soon the battered old wooden tables are covered with brightly colored Cantonese dishes. The men drink strong rice wine or beer while the women drink a sweet beer that contains no alcohol.

When the guests have finished eating one dish, another arrives to replace it. Every half hour or so the bride and bridegroom leave their seats and walk from table to table to distribute candy and cigarettes to the guests.

After a couple of hours the first phase of the dinner is over and the tables are cleared.

But the celebration doesn't end there. A few hours later the banquet starts up again as new courses are offered to the guests.

After the first round of the banquet, close-family guests go inside to escape from the fierce afternoon sun. Surrounded by whirring fans, guests seated on chairs and couches talk quietly amongst themselves.

A group of men - the bridegroom among them - plays cards at a table in the living room. Most of the men smoke cigarettes as they play.

One bold girl sits on a couch and puffs on a cigarette. It's a surprising sight because few women are bold enough to smoke openly in Zhanjiang. Smoking is a man's habit and is frowned upon for women.

Each guest attending the wedding has brought a gift for the married couple. Some bring red envelopes stuffed with money; others bring a blanket, a quilt, or other useful household item.

Everyone is in high spirits today, including Chen Mei Ying. She says her one hope is that life will be kind to her in the days ahead. I just want to have a better life, she says. I want to have better food to eat and better clothes to wear. This is what I want for the future.

Wedding Day in the Big House

It's one of the largest houses in the village. It has three stories and rises above the nearby houses. In the fields surrounding the house, ripening rows of sugarcane waver and hiss in the wind.

A small crowd has gathered around tables set up outside the house to celebrate the wedding of the villager who lives here.

Most Long Wan men search outside the village for a wife, but the groom today is marrying a woman from Long Wan - someone he has known for many years. Although the Liang family is richer than the Xu family, the wedding feasts given by the two families are nearly identical.

Outside the house, woks are steaming and food has been laid out on tables. A sharp fall light etches long shadows across the yard. To escape from a steady wind, the guests retreat to tables set up inside the house.

In a room on the second floor, the bride and groom greet a steady stream of guests. The groom is dressed in a new black suit, and his wife is wearing a new red dress. Every few minutes, the couple moves through the house to distribute candy and cigarettes to the guests.

The groom, whose family name is Liang, says he is one of five brothers who contributed money to build the family's impressive new house. He says his father died when he was very young and his mother raised the family.

Liang says the family has earned much of its money in the special economic zone of Shenzhen, a fast-growing open city near Hong Kong. He says a friend helped him find a construction job there.

The money in Shenzhen is good, he says. Good enough to build this 30,000-yuan house. Liang says he wouldn't have been able to afford to build such a large house if he had stayed in Long Wan and worked as a farmer.

Liang says all of his brothers are ambitious and have developed successful strategies to earn a living. One brother raises fish in the village; another is a driver in Zhanjiang. Each brother works outside the village and no longer relies on farm work to make a living.

When he returns to Shenzhen to work, his brothers stay behind to do the farm work. Someone has to stay behind to raise the rice and pay the government rice tax, he says.

Liang says he has been making at least 6,000 yuan a year working in

Shenzhen, compared with the 1,000 yuan he could earn working as a farmer in Long Wan.

Now that he is married he says he wants to have children - at least one son, though two sons and a daughter would be best. He says he doesn't worry about being punished by the government for violating the country's birth-control policy.

If I have to I will escape from this village, he says. No one can catch me. Children are like insurance. There's nothing better than to have children.























