

## **WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHS AND THE BRIDAL GAZE IN SINGAPORE**

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### **Introduction**

In various places in Asia such as Taiwan (Adrian 2003), China (Constable 2006), Singapore and Hong Kong, it is typical to find couples spending huge amounts of money from their wedding budgets on professional bridal photographs and keeping them in special wedding albums for their own enjoyment.<sup>2</sup> These bridal photographs capture shots of the marrying couples in different formal wedding attire and elaborated costumes, and with their hairstyles done by specialized bridal professionals.

Existing research points out that bridal photographs in the US and Asia are for meeting the couple's own consumption. Lewis (1998: 304) reports that lavish bridal photographers in the US fulfil the desire of the couples even though they follow the same procedures and produce the same images from wedding to wedding. These formulaic pictures are deemed to satisfy the couples as a result of consumerism and the "commodification of romance", to borrow Illouz's (1997) phrase. Similarly, Ingraham (1999), Boden (2003) as well as Otnes and Pleck (2003) also attribute the concept of the lavish wedding to the influence of mass-mediated notions of wedding romanticism.

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<sup>2</sup> Such photographs will hereafter be referred to as bridal photographs or wedding photographs.

Lavish weddings grant satisfaction to couples while glorifying romantic love and the love of romantic consumer goods (Otnes and Pleck 2003: 19).

Another form of consumption on bridal photographs as found in the literature is due to the longing for western modernity, such as those found in China and Taiwan. The meaning of these wedding pictures is explained as an experience and imagination of “western” modernity and the local’s response towards globalization. Adrian (2003) argued that wedding photographs in Taiwan are western images appropriated with Taiwanese flavour. Wedding photographs there transcend cultural borders and create new and surprising meanings. In Mainland China, Constable (2006: 43) suggests that wedding photographs are not only an imagination of western modernity, but are also nostalgic memories of Chinese traditional feminine beauty and idealized gender images.

The present paper is different from the literature in that it presents bridal photographs as satisfying the bridal gaze, which is the gaze of others rather than the couple’s. The concept of the gaze was first introduced by Foucault (1967) and has since been studied by many prominent social scientists (Goffman 1959, Mulvey 1989, Berger 1972). Foucault (1967) discusses how madness was a pure spectacle, something to be looked at. To him, the gaze is a form of omnipresent surveillance. This gaze is operated through the panopticon,<sup>3</sup> which almost any individual can exercise.

Inspired by Foucault (1967, 1969) and Urry (1990),<sup>4</sup> the concept of the bridal gaze is introduced here to refer to an eclectic way of seeing, encountering and understanding things and this way of seeing and explaining the bridal photographs bears social, cultural, and normative significance. Bridal photographs are gazed at by the wider audience, which is an anonymous aggregate of individuals who are unconnected to each other by social relationship and social interaction. Bridal gaze is the aggregated outlook of the wider audience, such as kin, family, colleagues and friends.<sup>5</sup> It is the wider audience’s way of seeing what is anticipated and expected in the bridal pictures. The influence and the impact of the gaze on the individuals are real and by no means abstract.

In Singapore, the bridal gaze is made possible by professional photographers and executed by viewers. This gaze includes firstly the expectation for the norm that a couple entering into marriage should have

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<sup>3</sup> The panopticon is a term first used by Bentham (1791: 1-10) to describe his ideal of an “inspection house” to be used for surveillance purposes in public institutions such as prisons and workhouses. The panopticon is a circular construction of open single “cells” built around a central inspection tower, by means of which the inspectors and the inmates were under constant surveillance.

<sup>4</sup> Urry (1990) used the concept of tourist gaze to understand the activities of tourists.

<sup>5</sup> For bridal photographs, there is no one single gaze as the wider audience’s gaze is diverse due to different class, religion, and economic background.

bridal photographs. It expects bridal photographs to conform to a certain formulaic pattern—with the bride and groom in elaborate costumes and flawless hairdos, the bride with thick make-up, carefully prepared background scenery either in a studio or at a scenic site, and photography by professional photographers. Secondly, the bridal gaze includes an appreciation of the romantic love expressed in these photographs. It demands an illusory narration of romantic couples in bridal photographs. It expects the couple to demonstrate romantic love in pictorial form, being expressed through body language and through the various poses orchestrated by professional photographers. Through gazing at the spectacular photographs, romantic love and conjugality are applauded by friends and relatives. We argue that the bridal gaze arose from public expectations for bridal pictures, which reveal the meaning of modern marriage in Singapore.

Data on bridal photographs were primarily collected through in-depth interviews in Singapore. First-hand observations were conducted while the couples were on trips to take bridal photographs outside the studio. Our observations were focused on how individuals as the wider audience reacted to the scenes of couples taking bridal photographs outdoors, on how the photographer directed the couple in posing, and on the various interactions between the couple during the photography. Interviews with the couples and photographers during the photography sessions also yielded useful insights. Secondary sources of information are various bridal websites, online forums and bridal magazines. Consideration of these websites is significant as bridal photographers and marrying couples alike consult the internet frequently for wedding-related materials.<sup>6</sup> However, the information obtained from these secondary sources is intended to supplement that obtained from fieldwork.

This paper will proceed as follows. It begins by examining how bridal photographs have become objects of the bridal gaze in recent decades. We will begin by narrating different types of bridal photographs at different times in Singapore and also examine how they are linked with the changing ideology of family and marriage. Modern lavish wedding photographs focusing on the couple will be analyzed in detail as a formulaic performance shot in standard poses. The bridal gaze will be examined to understand the importance of formulaic pictures to marrying couples. Lastly, we will examine how some couples, though few in number, create alternative bridal photographs, which escape the bridal gaze.

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<sup>6</sup> This is discovered through the course of interviews with them.

## Changing Wedding Photographs: The Triumph of Couplehood

In the 1950s and 1960s, the wedding photographs were family-centred bridal photographs. Wedding albums usually contained around five to ten photographs taken at the studio.<sup>7</sup> The majority of these photographs were family photographs, in which close relatives of the bride and the groom were present. For the few photographs that captured only the marrying couple, they were usually photographed looking blankly into the camera. In the words of an informant who got married in 1966, it is more appropriate “to say that family photographs were taken in those days rather than to refer to them as the bridal photographs that we have today”. Wedding photographs were taken when the entire extended families of a few generations gathered at the bridal studio on the wedding day itself.<sup>8</sup> Some Chinese families even had wedding portraits with clan members, which were taken at the clan associations (Chan 2003: 64). This reveals how Chinese weddings in Singapore were mostly intended to celebrate the introduction of a new member into the family.

In those days, the photograph-taking session was considered a minor event among the rituals on the wedding day. In fact, the highlight of the traditional wedding ceremony was a series of rituals that signified the incorporation of the bride into the groom’s family. Maurice Freedman (1957, 1958, 1970) noted that marriage was to celebrate the continuity of patrilineal ideology with an emphasis on the introduction of a new member into the patrilineal family and the continuity of a descent line through having sons. Weddings were entirely family-oriented events in which the parents or the family took charge of most of the arrangements.<sup>9</sup> Wedding photographs further revealed that marriage was a family event rather than an event celebrated by the couple. They addressed the key meaning of the marriage—incorporation of a woman into the patriarchal family.

Today, two sets of photographs are often taken. The first set of pictures is classified as actual-day wedding photographs and consists of pictures of bride and groom together with their relatives and friends on the wedding day. They are not taken in a studio but at the banquet or at other celebrations during the actual wedding day. These pictures are however not considered that important as compared with the second set of photographs,

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<sup>7</sup> The number of photographs depends on the economic situation of the couples and their personal preferences.

<sup>8</sup> As bridal photographs were considered expensive in these early days, most families only had a few bridal photographs taken (in 3R and 4R black-and-white photographs), as compared to the contemporary elaborate wedding albums of today.

<sup>9</sup> Romantic love was not regarded as a central issue as most people in those days were match-made or were married after meeting a couple of times in the presence of other close relatives.

which is taken months before the actual wedding with the groom and the bride only and is known as studio or professional or simply bridal photographs. The division into two sets of pictures with hierarchical meaning implies that the marriage is no longer celebrated to welcome a new member of the family but increasingly as a union of a couple.

In the professional bridal photographs, all attention is on the couple, with all other people being excluded. The bride is often photographed to be like a princess with her prince in their own land of romance. These bridal photographs are divided into indoors and outdoors, with the outdoor shots taken at scenic spots around Singapore and the indoor ones at the bridal shop's studio. These photography sessions last around 8 to 10 hours, with the couple usually at the studio in the morning and early afternoon and going outdoors from late afternoon to evening. The indoor photographs are taken in the studio, with the couples in formal poses such as the standard classic portrait position. For outdoor photographs, the couple would be shown in picturesque locations in their country, where they are photographed in romantic postures, such as gazing at each other in the twilight of sunset, or having fun such as frolicking and chasing after each other on the beaches. For the entire photography session, at least 85 to 120 studio and outdoor shots would be taken. This number is way in excess of what the couple eventually retain, and is intended to give them ample choice to select from. Most couples end up with between 15 to 20 photographs and these are the photographs that will make their way into the bridal album. For these few professional photographs, it has become a norm that most couples will spend at least a few thousand Singaporean dollars on their bridal photographs.<sup>10</sup> The professional bridal photography session often aims to capture the bridal experience and to narrate an illusionary fairytale of romance and idealism through beautifully constructed bridal photographs.

More importantly, the bride is often considered the centre of attention in these bridal photographs. This is in fact the only occasion for patriarchal families in which women are gazed upon as the focal point. Women are seen to be gorgeous and beautiful brides who play an important role in cultivating a loving relationship with grooms. The meaning is different from the traditional wedding photographs or wedding rituals of old, in which women were gazed upon for their separation from the natal family and incorporation into the groom's family.

The changing content of wedding photographs shows the new meaning of family and marriage in today's Singapore. Wedding photographs also reveal couplehood and conjugality is celebrated and extended kin ties are downplayed in importance. Today, marriage is neither match-made nor instituted for the interests of the family line in terms of having children.

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<sup>10</sup> One US dollar is around 1.55 Singapore dollars.

Marriage partners are now decided by individuals and usually meet through their own social networks. These individuals are witnesses and beneficiaries of industrialization and modernization in Singapore, when rapid social and economic change began from the late 1960s and 1970s. Both men and women of the younger generation have also gained a greater degree of financial independence and have increasingly taken the initiative to control their marriage. Together with the enforcement of the monogamous marriage since 1961, there is also an increasing emphasis on affection, companionship, and mutual care between married couples in Singapore.<sup>11</sup> Romantic love rather than matchmaking has become the more common route to marriage in Singapore. Thus, there is a transition from traditional arranged marriages to companionate marriages in which the meaning of marriage moves away from serving the interests of extended families to the couples themselves. Marriage has today been transformed from an event that is strictly embedded in a large complex family system to an occasion that is largely taken charge of by the couple. Bridal photographs further provide satisfaction for people through anticipation and imagination of romantic images and couplehood.

While the bridal photographs can be interpreted as “an idealized view” of the wedding between two “unique” individuals in theatrical terms, couples are never actually in a world of their own in these occasions, as weddings are family-oriented events. Weddings often involve negotiations and decisions on bride price, dowry, banquets, bridal package, details of rituals performed on the wedding days, and housing arrangements after marriage. These decisions are however not made solely by the couples, but also involve the participation of their family members. For most couples, the whole wedding is neither fun nor hassle-free. They have reported that wedding preparations are the most stressful and anxious periods of their lives. Conflicts, quarrelling, negotiation, and bargaining are inevitably involved in the wedding preparations. In fact, the taking of wedding photographs is the only arena in which the couple has full control. It is the couples that pay for the wedding photographs, while other items such as banquets or apartments are frequently at least partially sponsored by their parents. Bridal photographs have therefore become an important arena in which the couple celebrates the ideal modern ideology of romantic love and imagines the triumph of couplehood over family.

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<sup>11</sup> Singapore legislated the Women's Charter in 1961, designed to safeguard the rights of women. It included a provision that required all marriages to be monogamous.

### Formulaic Images: Standard Poses, Make-up, and Sites

Bridal pictures are considered formulaic in several ways: standard poses, standard location, and heavy make-up with doll-like brides. Couples are to a large extent following instructions from the studio and the photographers for getting into certain poses at pre-specified locations. Couples are quite powerless and passive in the process of this performance because they mainly follow the instructions of the photographers. They model their bodies in unnatural poses and stage a self-conscious performance under the supervision of the photographers. Throughout each session, the photographer spends as little as a few seconds to five minutes teaching couples how to pose properly for each shot. Bridal photographers told us that they constantly replicate their poses for couples. Formulaic poses were indeed preferred by photographers because they know that tried and proven poses—especially their “specialty poses”—would be popular with clients. It would be too time consuming and risky to expect photographers to come up with various poses for different couples.

Indeed, tried and proven poses, images in romantic movies, magazines, and celebrity weddings were also replicated by photographers. For instance, Christine narrated that her photographer took a shot which he explained was akin to a scene from a film *Autumn in New York* (2000)<sup>12</sup> and was one of his most valued specialty shots. In fact, this photographer’s specialty shot had been reproduced numerous times but people remained in love with it. Moreover, couples also enact scenes from films that they like. Other informants Xinli and her husband, Kenneth, took a studio bridal shot borrowed from a scene in the Chinese film, *In the Mood for Love*.<sup>13</sup> As a result of this endless production and reproduction of bridal photographs from various domains, these photographs become what Lewis (1998) as well as Otnes and Pleck (2003) have labelled as formulaic.

In terms of sites, standard places such as parks and beaches were found in bridal photographs. Although couples have a choice in choosing outdoor locations for photo taking, they often fall back on the popular spots, those that have been used umpteen times by the photographer. One bride, Jan, said that she did not mind as long as the photographer was familiar with the place

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<sup>12</sup> The American film, *Autumn in New York* (2000), was directed by Joan Chen and depicted the tale of a middle-aged playboy who fell in love with a terminally ill young woman. The photographer claimed to be replicating a scene of New York street life as depicted in the film.

<sup>13</sup> The Hong Kong film, *In the Mood for Love* (2000), was directed by Kar Wai Wong and narrated a passionate and tragic tale of a man and woman who lived next to each other and developed a peculiar bond after discovering that their spouses were having extra-marital affairs. The scene that Xinli and her husband borrowed was adapted from one of the film’s promotion posters.

because he knew the best camera angles and the scenic spots to take good photographs. In another instance, when a couple took their photographs at a particular spot on Changi Beach, there were two other couples there, waiting for their turn to get photographed at the same spot. Polly also mentioned a similar tale and claimed that they got the best sunset spot in Sentosa Island because they arrived there early.

More interestingly, all brides appearing in the bridal photographs were film star-like and wore heavy make-up. In fact, the heavy make-up is called bridal make-up. Many viewers of bridal photographs including the groom would agree that the bride looks dramatically different from her everyday appearance after the heavy foundation, fake eyelashes, elaborated hairstyles, and unique costumes. The make-up, hairstyles, and costumes are not what the bride would wear in everyday life. It is not unusual to find the couple arriving as early as two hours before the photography session to put on the bride's make-up. The photography session begins when the bride is done with her make-up, which often does not happen until noon. There are usually two instances during the photography session when the bride has to adjust her make-up or hairstyle to project different images and they account for another two hours or so of preparation.<sup>14</sup> Bridal photos that result from the heavy make-up, elaborate hairstyles, and repeated posing are indeed spectacular performances.

In fact, most brides and the grooms were also aware that they were merely acting and reproducing these previously produced images either by doing the same pose or going to the same location, or even doing a combination of both. Many couples realize that their pictures are clichéd and largely similar to those of friends. As one informant, Lee, lamented: “even if my photos have my face, I still know they probably look like those of my friend. Especially since I recommended my photographer to him!” In other words, there is little creativity in the wedding industry and the current poses for bridal photographs in standard locations are clichéd images. In fact, the customers might not be willing to accept the photographs if they are too creative. Clichéd images with standard poses, make-up, and sites were taken because spectacular images sell well since they have proven to be popular with the viewers.

### **Genuine Fakes and Staging Authenticity**

In taking formulaic bridal photographs, the couples are often engaged in the process of “staging authenticity”. This process is analogous to the tourist

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<sup>14</sup> The make-up artist gave the groom only 15 minutes of attention; she styled the groom's hair and put some loose face powder on his face and promptly declared that he was ready.



gaze, in which the “hosts” take the interests of the “viewers” into account when staging and preparing “authentic” local cultures for tourists to consume. In the case of bridal photos, the couples are the “hosts” (performers) while their friends and relatives are the viewers. They stage a demonstration of romantic love and blissful conjugality—both “authentic” features in modern marriages—in pictorial form. Nevertheless, these bridal photos are largely “genuine fakes”, a term first introduced by Brown (1996: 33), who used it to describe newly invented heritage sites, which arouse deep and genuine feelings. In this context, we suggest that bridal photos are “genuine fakes” because they are an “unreal” display of people in “unspontaneous” postures and “uncommon” locations. For instance, the common dating sites were never taken by the photographers. This is well-illustrated by the following remarks by Eric and Kris: “I first met Kris at Macdonald’s. No way am I going back there to take my wedding photos! . . . Yeah . . . people will also wonder why I go to such a common place to take my wedding pictures!”

In fact, bridal photos are mostly taken in locations where the couples hardly visit during courtship. When we asked couples if they had visited the places where they took the romantic photographs before, nearly all of them said “no”. It is also interesting to note that informants are reluctant to have their photographs taken at places that they are familiar with, as they viewed these places as “too common”. Christine and Kenneth also highlighted that taking photographs at common places would not bring out the importance of the event. Christine said that she wanted something that looked timeless and preferred locations that she did not know so she could not date them. Through the “uncommon” and “fake” locations selected, couples find their photographs very romantic. Bridal photographs merely reveal what it is supposed to be instead of how it is. Real romance is believed to be scenes out of romantic movies, where couples stroll on the beach or smooch amidst a romantic backdrop. Such are the images that photographers enact for their clients who desire “genuine fake” romance.

Couples were merely performing and manufacturing romantic images of courtship through taking photographs in costumes they had not previously worn and in places where they never went during courtship. Indeed, the couples are thriving on a “pseudo-event”, to use Boorstin’s (1961: 9) term. These are events or activities that almost solely exist within the realm of advertisements or other forms of publicity, but do not actually occur in real life. These gorgeous and “unreal” bridal photos are spectacles, which are meant to manufacture, represent, and portray “genuine” romantic feelings between each couple.

It is important to note that romantic and gorgeous images are performances in the “front region” while the photography work is at the backstage or “back region”, using Goffman’s (1959: 52) terms. It is in the

latter where the “dirty work” of putting on the make-up and attire and of correcting any errors that occur before the actual performance. Mistakes in posing and facial expressions are thoroughly corrected before the click of the camera. According to a groom Loi, the back region is “an operation-kind of thing, you know, and super-tiring; but I think the bride is the most tired”. During a bridal photo taking session, a groom told his wife after a bridal makeover, “You don’t look like yourself anymore”. The bride’s applied make-up was similar to the thick “artist” type that can cover many flaws on human faces. Adrian (2003: 147) describes brides as wearing: “A sort of mask painted right onto their skin . . . bridal makeovers turn women into brides, transforming everyday women with their individual characteristics into generic look-alike beauties in three hours’ time”. Thick make-up allows the bride to put on a gorgeous performance while posing for photographs. The thick make-up also takes the bride long hours to scrub her face clean from the make-up after the bridal performance. According to Adrian (2003), who took bridal photographs as part of her fieldwork, she said she needed four days to remove all the make-up. A lot of brides claimed they had “fun” as stars in the “performance” during their photography session.

### **Bridal Gaze**

It is important to note that taking and displaying elaborate wedding photographs in Singapore has emerged as an important ritual in which couples put in a lot of time, energy, and money. This is similar to the findings of Adrian (2003) who also discovered that taking wedding photographs has become a new ritual that has replaced the traditional Chinese wedding rituals and served as an important rite of passage to the brides. At weddings in Singapore, the display of bridal photographs is a definite entertainment for the guests especially while they are waiting to be seated for the dinner. Among all bridal photographs, one of them would be enlarged and placed at the entrance of the wedding hall.<sup>15</sup> Over time, the display of bridal photographs as the symbol of a wedding and an object of gaze has become the norm. The norm becomes an expectation, resulting in the wider audience anticipating and expecting the visual signifier of bridal photography as an indispensable part of a wedding in Singapore.

In a wedding which one of the researchers attended, the couple had deviated from common practice by arranging for their photographs to be presented as a slideshow in the ballroom, to be shown right after the guests were seated there. Thus, the photographs were not shown to guests during

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<sup>15</sup> Couples usually select the best picture and enlarge it to about 3 feet x 2 feet with a beautiful frame. This picture would usually be hung in the master bedroom of their home.

the cocktail reception prior to the dinner, as is usually the case. A guest ran up and asked, "Where are the photos? I want to see that". The researcher told the guest that the photographs would be shown as a slide show later. The guest's reaction was, "Oh . . . I thought there wouldn't be any. I asked just in case. Thanks". Therefore, bridal photographs are normally treated as a "visible" of the wedding and they exult the best physical appearance of the couple.

At wedding banquets, bridal photographs serve as a gorgeous spectacle to be enjoyed, applauded, admired, and gazed at by viewers. They are spectacular performances that give primacy to visual senses and are things to be seen (MacAloon 1984: 243), to appeal to the eye of the public at the wedding banquets and other occasions when friends and families first visit the couple after marriage. They resemble pictures and portraits hanging in a museum, and serve as the principal visual memento for relatives and friends at weddings banquets. As spectacles, these wedding photographs are also signs and representations in Debord's (1994: 12) words. They are signs that reveal the worldview, the ideal norms of family and wedding, and salute romantic love and conjugality.

Bridal photographs are meant to satisfy the wider audience who are in search of formulaic wedding photographs that demonstrate intimacy and affection. The wider audience expects bridal photographs to follow a formulaic pattern; the bride and groom dress in elaborate costumes, the bride wears thick make-up, there is carefully selected background scenery either in a studio or at scenic sites, and the photographs are taken by professional photographers. Gazers seek satisfaction from gazing at formulaic bridal photographs with anticipation and imagination. The emotions of the couples and the viewers may become stirred. The process of gazing this spectacle serves as a "sacred" marriage ritual that the couples undergo to declare themselves as married.

Indeed, bridal photographs contain clichéd images in an evocative presentation style and cover a whole range; the groom may be kissing the bride, or the couple holding each other's hands and walking down a long road, or both of them looking intimately into each other's eyes. Couples enact scenes of romance and intimacy with the singular aim of freezing these moments onto pictures. The bride and groom should look as if they are having the time of their lives, with the bride at her ravishing best while the groom appearing handsome and gallant. These idealized images highlight the romantic love and the union of a unique couple. This is drastically different from the old days in which these "private moments" were not supposed to be seen by the public. Today, the viewers gaze upon them and are expected to endorse the spectacular performance of blissful couplehood and romance. Indeed, bridal photographs fulfil public expectations of modern companionate marriage centred on the public celebration of romantic

love.

It is also important to note that couples themselves are genuinely concerned about how the others will gaze at their photographs. They are very enthusiastic in seeking “approval” or positive comments on their photos from close friends, relatives, and colleagues. They are apprehensive that their photographs will not live up to the expectations of their wider audience that include families and friends. Dismayed by the “negative” reception of photographs of the bridal gaze, a respondent insisted on retaking her bridal photographs with another bridal studio. Hence the initial exhibition of bridal photographs to the gaze of others can be a nerve-wrecking one to some couples as it is the first “test” of whether their bridal photographs can fit the socially ideal model. For some couples, the bridal gaze reinforce the fears they have about their photographs, while for others, such as Eric and Kris, “good compliments from people who had looked at [the] photographs” make them feel good about their pictures. Eric and Kris even see their bridal photographs as objects for the wider audience to view: “Heh, we don’t really feel anything much towards our photographs. I am very happy that we look good and I am the centre of attention . . . we have got quite good compliments from people who had looked at our photos and so we feel good”. Kris’ apparent satisfaction with observations of their photographs was tied to the viewers’ gaze, since she shaped her eventual view on her bridal photographs through the comments made by the wider audience.

Similarly, respondent Loi also suggested that his readings of his bridal photographs are tied to the opinion of the bridal gaze and self-relevant meanings are not prominent. He said: “My photographs only had me pretending to smile, quite fake . . . . These are not my style. I only get through this for the relatives. I don’t even look at them after our wedding”. He viewed bridal photographs as objects needed to fulfil the public’s expectations. Therefore, the bridal photographs are to a large extent meant to satisfy the bridal gaze and not for the couple’s private consumption.

### **Negotiating Bridal Gaze**

In addition to the public meaning of bridal photographs derived from the bridal gaze, a private meaning also emerges as individuals assert diverse views about their own photographs. The private meaning is often a socially constituted bridal gaze. Couples’ impressions of their photographs are to a significant extent derived from the bridal gaze while they also add self-relevant meanings such as emotional attachment to their photographs. In these instances, active agency over the photographs is occasionally sought as couples decide on the style of photography that best brings out who “they” are and the associated self-relevant meanings to their photographs. At first,

respondent Jo said: “When I looked at the photographs, I saw me, the spirit of me inside the photographs. This was “Me” and it was important that my photos had the spirit of me inside; otherwise it wouldn’t be meaningful”. Her husband, Lee, explained that the photographs should reflect who they were and their love for each other. Jo also emphasized that she could identify with the romance that her photographs portrayed. Jo said: “Kissing and holding hands . . . we do this all the time. Only that now we captured it on film so that we can have beautiful memories of our relationship and our wedding”.

The “spirit of me” is merely an abstraction that is tightly restrained by the boundaries set by existing clichéd bridal images—romantic love. In other words, the couple’s own view of the bridal pictures is a socially constituted one from which they seek active agency, but they are still restricted to negotiate the meanings of their photographs within the framework set by the bridal gaze.

Besides, some couples seek to escape the limitations set by the bridal gaze by avoiding it altogether. The first option is to reject taking wedding pictures completely because they are considered artificial. Some end up not taking any pictures or having any banquets while others attach greater significance onto their actual-day photographs. The second way is to reject the conventional route that is expected by the bridal gaze. Instead, the couples take alternative bridal photography. In fact, there are various forms of alternative bridal photography in the commercial market, through which innovative photographers try to cater to the demands of a niche market that wants radically different photographs.<sup>16</sup> The main objective of alternative photography is to establish the couple’s personal style. Such photographs come in various forms at bridal shops. Examples include bridal albums full of black-and-white artistic photographs showing the unsmiling couple posing with their backs to the camera. Although artistic photographs with depressed expressions may violate the bridal gaze’s definition of happy photographs, they are being accepted by some couples and some general public, albeit reluctantly.

Alternative bridal photography has also experimented with nude and eroticized bridal photographs although these are exceptional. Nevertheless, local photographers do not advertise such services openly. Unsurprisingly, most informants said “no” to eroticized bridal photographs. One highlighted:

The couple is not wearing bridal clothes . . . how can it count as a wedding photo? No way . . . wedding photos are about a bride in a wedding gown and a groom in nice suit. . . . Those [nude photographs] are just sexy, not wedding photos. Besides I can’t show my relatives

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<sup>16</sup> Evidence remains clear that photographers still have most of their clients taking standard bridal photographs.

such pictures. What would they think of me?

As such, alternative definitions of bridal photographs such as eroticized photographs are unlikely to be recognized formally as bridal photographs by the bridal gaze. The question of what constitutes a bridal photograph is highly influenced by public conventions of the bridal image. Nude or eroticized photographs are totally unacceptable to the public and are only for couples' own consumption because they push beyond the proper borders of appropriate bridal photographs as defined by the general public. This explains the "hush-hush" culture of couples and photographers taking such photographs. Most of the time, couples who pose for such photographs must still attempt to satisfy public convention by producing some typical bridal photographs for the consumption of the bridal gaze. Hence couples taking a few eroticized or nude photographs may choose to have the bulk of their photographs in the form of clichéd bridal images. The few personal images that are taken would be kept for the couple's private consumption and totally out of the knowledge and scrutiny of the bridal gaze. A couple in Singapore, who took a few eroticized shots with the photographer Eric, did not display their eroticized photographs during their wedding dinner because they found it strange to think of people seeing them that way. Another bride, Marilyn, said her mother would think she was crazy if she had shown her eroticized photographs to her (*Streets* 28 February 2002: 10-11).

For those few couples who want to display their nude photographs to the bridal gaze, instead of having full nudity they would make adjustments by concealing the strategic parts of their bodies. For example, in the case of Mei and Ming, they only chose to bare themselves from their waists upwards while strategically concealing the bride's chest (*The Straits Times* 16 March 2003: 24-25). Mei claimed that she showed these photographs to her family and they loved them (*ibid.*). Mei was a very rare case, as most people cannot even imagine showing such photographs to others, especially their own families. In other words these photographs, which are meant for the couple's eyes only, carry the symbolic meaning of asserting marriage as a private and individual matter between the couple.

### **Concluding Remarks: Saluting Romantic Love and Couplehood**

The existing literature on bridal photographs has clearly pointed out the consumer-driven satisfaction that these pictures yield to couples, who are willing to pay lavishly for them. In addition to this direct consumption satisfaction to couples, this paper suggests that such photographs are also for satisfying the expectations of others—the bridal gaze. Bridal photographs are important objects of gaze for kin, family, and friends to appreciate, endorse,

and approve at the wedding.

The bridal gaze demands formulaic bridal photographs, which are not constructed through differentiation and innovation but through imitation and standardization. Couples who reproduce clichéd romantic images are happy to fill up their own wedding album. The formulaic photographs involve elaborate costumes and hairdos for the couple, thick makeup for the bride, beautiful background scenery either in a studio or at a scenic site, and photography handled by professional photographers.

The bridal gaze also demands that the couple demonstrates romantic love in these photographs through their body language and the various poses orchestrated by professional photographers. In fact, the couple hold themselves in unnatural postures and demonstrate exaggerated expressions of love and romance in these photographs, which create a form of pseudo-romance. Romance, as Jameson suggested, is “a wish fulfillment or Utopian fantasy which aims at the transfiguration of everyday life in such a way as to restore the conditions of some lost Eden” (Illouz 1997: 143).

Today, the romantic experience has been colonized by the market through visual imagination in elaborated bridal photographs. Taking bridal photographs is indeed, to use Illouz’s phrase (*ibid.*), an experience of “romance-ritual-consumption”. More importantly, taking and displaying formulaic photographs are about displaying glamorized and aestheticized romance, consuming fantasy, and gaining public approval. These images are ultimately meant for other people to view, for them to share in the romantic fantasy and intense joy, real or otherwise, of the couples. Thus, the romantic love of couples, as the ideal of modern companionate marriage, is now celebrated by the bridal gaze.

As a new wedding ritual, displaying and taking wedding photographs involves a socially organized celebration of romantic love and married life. It also presents the pictorial exhibition of a society’s idealized wedding. The visualization of romantic love in front of family members and friends is also to pronounce the imagined victory of conjugality over extended family ties. Much of what is appreciated is not experienced reality but ideal representations and fantasy. Bridal photographs are signs, which broadcast the ideal of modern companionate marriage. Images in bridal photographs often uphold the ideal romantic images of couplehood and an imagined two-person world away from their families. In saluting the ideal of conjugality, couples temporarily imagine themselves to be away from their mundane everyday lives, and to be free from the routines of family control and obligations with which they constantly struggle in the process of getting married.

Bridal photographs are spectacles put up by couples to follow and maintain the changing social imagination of ideal weddings. They embody a social rather than an individualistic phenomenon, and are linked with the

changing ideology of family and marriage. Bridal photographs at various times are spectacular illuminations through which we appreciate and imagine ideas about marriage. Bridal photographs today reveal the meaning of modern marriage as the union of an individual couple, and not their families. In contrast, bridal photographs in the 1950s portrayed the bride as a new member of the groom's family, and celebrated marriage as an incorporation of a woman into the patriarchal family. Indeed, spectacular bridal photographs show how individuals attempt to seek to conform to the idealized images held about marriage by the public.

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