

The harsh realities of post-revolutionary China made weddings a spartan affair, but technology is now helping people rewrite memories of the big day, writes Caroline Cooper



Re-arranged marriage

ON A BUSY STREET in Beijing's Dongcheng district, a row of simple shops vie for business from pedestrians. Pasted to one front window is a colourful advertisement that catches the attention of passers-by. It features red hearts circling bright yellow characters that read: "Treasure Your Love."

Underneath is the proclamation: "Take your old photograph and compose a brilliant wedding photo." And the pictures featured in the promotion tell what is in store. A black-and-white shot of a young Chinese couple appears in one corner, the woman's hair plaited in the traditional braids of the 1960s. The man wears a simple shirt. Blown up behind the couple is their more modern look.

The latest image shows the husband in a white tuxedo with black trim. His bride smiles from behind a white wedding veil. The original photograph was taken in the middle of the last century, but in the newly created photo – that was never actually taken – the couple hasn't aged a day.

"I don't do those kinds of photos here," the saleswoman inside the shop says. "But it's becoming more and more popular in Beijing. I can tell you where to go to get that done, if you are interested. It's not far from here."

She turns the advertisement around and traces her finger over the small map on the back. This side of the paper features more updated couples, posing gamely in formal western attire, looking stern in imperial silks, or playful in Shanghai stylings. The shop, called Cherish the Old Photograph Design Creation Centre, is just a short distance away.

Marriage is big business in China. According to the mainland news media, there were 8.3 million weddings in 2004, a rise of 227,000 from 2003. While families in more upwardly mobile cities tend to spend more on weddings than their rural counterparts, nuptials across the main-

land mean banqueting, many friends and plenty of heavy drinking – all of which costs dearly. Weddings in the urban centres of Tianjin and Beijing cost an average of US\$12,500.

Marriage photography is one of the essential parts of the process, and modern couples spend at least one day before their wedding posing and smiling in countless settings, often in rented gowns and suits. A single session in one of the better shops, with full makeup, hair, clothes and photography, can cost up to US\$3,240, or twice the average annual salary in Beijing. "For newly rich Chinese, the price is not too high," says Fan Liang of New York New York Wedding Photography in downtown Beijing.

"WE DID NOT HAVE THE LAVISH CLOTHES, THE PHOTOS. THOSE THINGS WERE CRITICISED, AND VERY MUCH FORBIDDEN"

Jin Hui Customer



Ou Yang and Jin Hui (above) discuss changes to photographs along the lines of other images (top) doctored by the booming Beijing outlet. PHOTOS: CAROLINE COOPER

But for those who married under Mao Zedong, there was no opportunity for stylised wedding photographs. From the 50s to the mid-70s, the government simplified weddings and promoted the legal registration process, rather than a traditional marriage ceremony, as the real way to hold a wedding. Couples could only feature props such as a flower or a freshly pressed military uniform to dress up their wedding photo – or risk being politically stigmatised.

With the advent of Photoshop technology and a spirit of enterprise, those old images are being digitally altered to create the dream wedding picture the couple would have wanted for themselves. Old men and women, their faded black-and-

white photos depicting love in a time of revolution, are flocking to the businesses.

While many photo agencies agree to create such photographs, complete with soft focus wooded backgrounds and frilly wedding dresses, few operations make it their sole business. Cherish the Old Photograph Design Creation Centre does. The Chengdu-based shop opened in 1998 and now has a dozen branches scattered across four provinces. The Beijing branch opened in April last year.

"Around 25 couples come in with old photographs to be changed every month," says Ou Yang, an employee at Cherish's Beijing branch. The shop window features large photos of their proudest alteration work. With only the faces being transferred from the old photo to the new, the effect is reminiscent of painted cartoon boards people wedge their faces into at carnivals.

"Most of our customers are over 50, and they married when this kind of photography was not available," says Ou.

There seems to be a steady stream of customers bustling in and out of the store. Cherish's walls are flanked with huge digitally re-touched photographs in bright reds, greens and yellows. In some cases, a copy of the original black and white photo is wedged into the gilded frame of the newly created one. The older photographs have a seriousness about them. Most couples appear wary, but valiant. It's not the typical wedding-day look.

In the centre of the shop, a single rod of fluorescent lighting seems to make the big, colourful photographs on the walls seem even bigger and more garish. Ou comes back to talk about his work.

"Most people want to change their photographs to a western style, with a white dress and a suit," he says. "We take the faces from the old photographs, but everything else is changed on the com-

puters. The bodies are other people. Sometimes we alter the background, add a tree or change something. That's it."

The procedure is simple, but the effects can be dramatic and diverse. Most hold a static, staid pose that translates easily to the new, modern setting. But some expressions hint at other pressures and worries which the staff cannot remove with Photoshop.

"Our China has gone through many changes and periods," says Ou. "Most of the photographs are from the Cultural Revolution period. Wedding photography was pretty much banned during that time. So I have seen many wedding couples from that period."

At the heart of the altered wedding photo phenomenon is the desire to have a record of their special day that differs from reality. It's a kind of airbrushing of history. "Most people like the look of the new photos," says Ou. "Even though it's not their personal experience."

China remembers its history in interesting ways, and photographs underscore the way that history is doctored. Political figures have occasionally been airbrushed out of official images, and photos have been changed to make harvests look more bountiful or children healthier. A picture of Mao in a central part of the house was once politically essential, and remains a key decorative point in the country's less developed areas. For a period in the early to mid-90s, mini Mao portraits were *de rigueur* in most city taxis.

By changing their old wedding photos, photos that clearly speak of a more difficult time and place, into fluffy, modern concoctions, older Chinese are having a computer-generated shot at rewriting their personal histories.

"Many older Chinese did not have the chance to experience the usual coming-of-age milestones when they were young,"

says Professor Wang Zhenyu, co-director of the Family Research Institute at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. "Now, they will sometimes go to extreme measures to regain those experiences, especially with the new technology available."

Back at Cherish, Jin Hui strolls into the shop. Dressed in a neat three-piece suit with his hair carefully combed back, Jin, 78, has the air of a diplomat. He is bringing in some old photographs for repair, having redone his wedding photo the previous week. For that shot he had selected a sharp, western setting in which to position his wife's and his youthful faces. He placed himself in a white suit and his wife in a classic wedding gown.

Jin spent much of his youth in Russia, studying economics and international relations. He has with him several stern-faced photos of his younger self, posing in various locations around Moscow. Jin wanted to have the 50s photos restored. "Photo development was mostly not available in Moscow," Jin says. "I developed many of these photos myself."

Jin returned to China in 1960 and married his wife shortly afterwards. He remembers his wedding ceremony as a rather serious affair. "We did not have the lavish clothes, the photos. Those things were criticised, and very much forbidden. We didn't have the chance to make it a beautiful wedding," he says.

It was just a few weeks ago, while walking in his neighbourhood, that Jin discovered Cherish. "I was so surprised and happy to see that I could do this," he says. "I had my wedding photos immediately changed as a gift for my wife."

"I know there is a bit of a contradiction there," Jin says, reflecting on the fact that he is producing a memory that he doesn't really have. "But this opportunity of my youth was taken from me. This is all I can do to get it back."

PEOPLE Napoleon's English lesson

Napoleon Bonaparte was keen to learn English while in exile, documents shown in Britain for the first time reveal.

The deposed French emperor apparently wanted to learn the language of his foes so he could read what the London papers were writing about him, BBCi reported.

Scraps of paper from his English lessons in captivity on the island of St Helena go on show at London's National Maritime Museum on Thursday.

They include lines of French haltingly translated by Napoleon into English. Count Emmanuel de las Cases, who accompanied the emperor into exile after he surrendered to the English at the battle of Waterloo, wrote in his



memoirs about Napoleon's desire to learn the language.

According to him, Napoleon (above) had his first lesson on January 17, 1816, when he asked the count to dictate to him some sentences in French, which he then translated, using a table of auxiliary verbs and a dictionary.

PHOTOS: AP

Italian director Lattuada dies

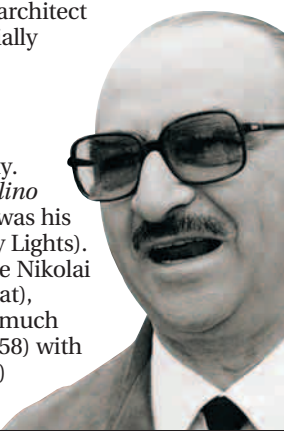
Veteran Italian director Alberto Lattuada has died at the age of 91 in his country home outside Rome.

In a career spanning over 40 years, he directed 32 films.

Born in Milan in 1914, he trained as an architect before going into cinema in the 1930s, initially designing sets.

His directorial debut came in 1942 with *Giacomo l'idealista*. He went on to make *Il Bandito* in 1946 with Anna Magnani, for which Federico Fellini wrote the screenplay. They later worked together again on *Il Mulino del Po*, which Lattuada (right) always said was his favourite film, and *Luci del Varieta* (Variety Lights).

In 1952, he made a surreal version of the Nikolai Gogol short story, *Il Cappotto* (The Overcoat), followed by *La Lupa* whose eroticism was much praised by the Surrealists, *La Tempesta* (1958) with Silvana Mangano, and *Dolci inganni* (1960) with Catherine Spaak. AFP



Cancer claims Four Tops founder 'Obie' Benson

Renaldo "Obie" Benson, a member of Motown singing group the Four Tops, has died, aged 69.

The singer died in a Detroit hospital from lung cancer. He was diagnosed after having a leg amputated due to circulation problems, BBCi reported.

The Four Tops sold 50 million records and had hits including *Reach Out (I'll be There)* and *I Can't Help Myself*.

The only surviving original members are Levi Stubbs and Abdul "Duke" Fakir. Lawrence Payton died in 1997.

Fakir said Benson (right) had "enjoyed every moment of his life".

"He put a smile on everyone's face, including my own," he said. The Four Tops began singing together in the 1950s under the



name the Four Aims, before signing with Motown Records in 1963. Benson was active with the group into his 60s, spending more than a third of each year performing on the road.

The Four Tops last appeared together in April on US TV's *Late Show With David Letterman*.

Pink to marry biker boyfriend

Multiplatinum singer Pink is getting married.

The 25-year-old proposed to her boyfriend of nearly four years – motocross racer Carey Hart – during a race in Mammoth Lakes, California.

The singer, whose real name is Alecia Moore, reportedly wrote "Will you marry me?" on a pit board, which Hart saw while he was racing.

The couple met at the 2001 X-Games in Las Vegas.

In 2002, Pink won a Grammy for best pop collaboration with vocals for her cover of *Lady Marmalade* with Lil' Kim, Mya and Christina Aguilera. AFP