

Taiwanese Wedding

In the spring of 1991, Huiling's mother pulled me aside and asked, "What exactly are your plans with my daughter?" As I had already discussed marriage with Huiling, my 24-year-old Taiwanese fiancée, Mrs. Chen's tone didn't fluster me. She was worried that should I, a 29-year-old American graduate student, not have marital intentions, her family would suffer a great loss of face. (In Asia, face is equivalent to respect, and great efforts are made to establish and preserve it.) Mrs. Chen worried that it might be impossible to find a husband for Huiling were I not to marry her. ¶ One point that infuriated her was my inability to find a *meiren* (pronounced may-ren). With her index finger jabbing at every Chinese syllable, she yelled, "And what about your meiren? Your family is so far away. They have to come here. To our house. To talk to us. But they don't speak Taiwanese. They

don't even speak Mandarin!" Mrs. Chen went on and on until I wasn't sure which she thought was worse, my marrying her daughter or not marrying her. ¶ I asked some friends about a meiren, and learned that it's a title given to the groom's relative who goes to the prospective bride's house to carry out all the touchy negotiations that go into planning a traditional Chinese wedding. Ideally, the meiren is the person who first introduced the couple. Having a meiren is a little old-fashioned, but a meiren can be useful. As a third party, they help save face during the arguments that inevitably arise over issues like the dowry amount and how many "marriage cakes" to buy, which are sent to relatives and friends to announce the engagement. One could easily spend \$6,000 on these cakes alone. ¶ Determined to make

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the Chens proud to have a foreign son-in-law, I searched for a meiren. A Chinese friend warned me against using an American acquaintance. Wedding negotiations are subtle and intense, and a foreign meiren would be inappropriate. He told me I needed an older man, someone who could dicker from a position of authority. Someone with face.

I work as an Asian representative of a British company that produces shoe manufacturing machinery, so I asked my boss, Mr. Lin, to suggest a meiren. He recommended that I ask Mr. Wu, who works at my company. Mr. Wu is a folksy fellow who helped me get a resident visa, an intricate process that took three months. He was delighted to assist, assuring me he would need only a small "red envelope." Huiling later explained that red envelopes are used for cash gifts at ceremonies and on holidays, and a meiren generally gets \$500–\$1,000.

The next day, Mr. Lin burst out of a meeting grinning broadly, patting one of our customers on the back. "Mr. Ou has agreed to be your meiren. He will do much better than Mr. Wu, who is too soft and easygoing. Mr. Ou will give you big face and ensure your girlfriend's parents give you lots of things." With growing interest, I asked, "What kinds of things?" "Their house, car, their money, that kind of stuff," Mr. Ou explained confidently. "Don't I need to give them money?" I asked. "You only give them money if you don't know what you're doing," confided Mr. Ou, as he spit a betel nut into an ashtray.

"First, you have to sleep with your girlfriend," he explained. "Make sure her parents know. Tell the relatives. That will drop the dowry way down. My wife's parents wanted \$100,000. I slept with her and it dropped to \$50,000. I said 'No way!' and slept with her again.

The price dropped to \$20,000. Still too much! Finally, they settled for \$10,000 just to stop me from doing it until after the wedding. And I got the house, which is worth over \$100,000."

My primary goal in finding a meiren was to gain the Chen's trust and respect, and parading our personal adventures didn't sound like the best way to achieve this. "Is this what you're going

Determined to make my future in-laws proud to have a foreign son-in-law, I set out to do everything according to Taiwanese traditions. But no matter how hard I tried, nearly every incident illustrated how easily communication in a cross-cultural relationship can become muddled.

to talk to them about?" I asked Mr. Ou. I tried to picture how I would act while he told my future in-laws what would happen if they didn't reduce the dowry. "No, no, of course not. I'm going to tell them what a great, honorable man you are, and how you'll take care of them when they're old, and that you'll give them money. They'll know what I mean. By the way, you have to give them some money now or you'll never get the house later. How much money can you give? \$20,000? \$10,000?"

I felt nauseated. Only a summer out of grad school, I was broke. "I really don't have anything at the moment," I admitted. Mr. Ou looked disappointed, even a bit peeved. "Well," he said, "you're going to have to give me a pretty big red envelope, and you better sleep with her a lot!"

Later I asked my boss about using Mr. Wu as a meiren after all, as he

seemed a little more conventional, not to mention cheaper. "Oh, Mr. Wu will be there, too," he said offhandedly. I was confused. Why both? "You can't just come with one person," he explained. When asked how many people I needed, Mr. Lin replied casually, "Six, but 12 is better."

Huiling assured me that 6 and 12 are lucky numbers, and in a traditional and formal engagement I would need either number of people. This sure seemed extravagant but—money be damned—I was determined to do things the Taiwanese way and prove my worthiness. I would work overtime, borrow here and there, scrimp on a few red envelopes, and buy a cheaper ring.

It took a week to build my team of meiren. My boss, Mr. Lin, reluctantly agreed. Mr. Ou recruited his business partner. And there was Mr. Chen, from our sales department; young but conservative and prone to wearing ties. With Messrs. Ou and Wu, I had five meiren, so I cajoled Mr. Ou to sign on one of his old customers. I barely knew him, but he looked distinguished. I had my meiren team at last!

I proudly stopped by Huiling's parents' house to make the date. "Six people will be coming by with me next Monday to visit with you, can you be here?" They seemed pleased with the news and told me they'd be ready. The next day I called Huiling to make sure she'd have the best tea and fruit for the guests. I heard her mother ask in the background, "Why does he want to bring all those friends, anyway?"

"They're not friends, they're meiren," I told Huiling. "Why in the world are you bringing six meiren?" she exclaimed. I swallowed hard. "To negotiate. To talk to your folks. I don't know, it's your custom!" I heard Mrs. Chen again

shouting in the background, "What meiren? Six meiren? Who ever heard of that? What does he want with all those meiren? What am I supposed to say to all of them? Six! That's crazy!" I was losing my cool. "You said six. Everybody said six! I booked six!"

Huiling replied evenly, "Listen, you need six people, but only one meiren. Now count. I'm one person, Mom and Dad make three, one meiren, and a friend and you make six. But don't worry. My parents decided months ago not to bother about a meiren."

Our meiren scenario illustrates how easily communication in a cross-cultural relationship can become muddled. Due to my imperfect Mandarin and my inexperience with Taiwanese customs, I confused the need for six people with the need for six meiren. But the exact role of the meiren wasn't clear, even to the Chens. I negotiated the dowry terms, and they were very accommodating; we agreed on the number of cakes and that the dowry would include a check for \$80,000—a rubber check.

Huiling's family had only recently moved to the city. Their customs are rooted in their rice farming background, and no one could agree which ceremonial practices were still viable. When my in-laws were married, it was common for the groom to ride on horseback, carrying a side of raw pork and stalks of sugarcane. Today, a brand-new Mercedes is the transportation of choice.

Just setting the date for the wedding was a lesson in Taiwanese culture. I had decided August would be best, as it would be convenient for my family. According to Taiwanese folk religion (a blend of Taoism, Buddhism, and ancestor worship) August is ghost month, when all the spirits rise from the dead. During this period, no one makes

major decisions and people refrain from traveling. To appease the ghosts, huge stacks of food and beverages are often placed in front of houses and factories. Getting married in ghost month would be the Western equivalent of having the wedding in a graveyard at midnight. We postponed the date until January.

On the wedding day my parents and friends gathered at the Plaza



Hotel for the procession to Huiling's. Traditionally, the groom's entourage would trek from his house to the bride's, and then both parties would return to the groom's for a banquet. Our procession (we couldn't come up with a Mercedes) arrived at Huiling's house to the wild roar of firecrackers. I stumbled out of the car to find a boy in a white tuxedo holding out two oranges. "Take them!" yelled the waiting crowd of relatives. I did, and they called out, "Give him a red envelope!" Oops. I had forgotten to fill the envelopes. Cameras flashed and everyone waited. Finally a relative stepped forward and stuffed some bills in a red envelope. I gave it to the boy who giggled and ran off. The crowd applauded. I was on my way.

Taiwanese weddings are casual in the ceremonial sense—they're never held in temples or churches, and they're not

presided over by ministers. Nor does the couple exchange vows. I wanted to include some Western practices, so we gave each other rings, and my father provided a reading. Since the Chens are Taoist, Huiling and I performed a *baibai*, a simple ceremony at their altar to announce our marriage and pay respect to the ancestors.

The highlight of the wedding was the

12-course Chinese feast at a local restaurant. As is the custom, Huiling and I, with parents in tow, stopped at each of the 23 tables and toasted my new relatives. The extended family introductions gave me further insight into Taiwanese culture. "This is your third eldest uncle on your father-in-law's side, you can call him Ah-bei. And this is your mother-in-law's youngest sister's first child. You can call her Mei mei." My parents couldn't understand the words, but shared in the outpouring of good wishes for a bright future.

Back at the hotel, exhausted, I asked my new wife how her family had liked the celebration. "They loved it," Huiling exclaimed. "You gave them huge face!" I asked, "How in the world did I manage that?" She smiled. "My aunt told everybody about the \$80,000 dowry check." Huiling laughed. "At the current exchange that's 2 million Taiwan dollars, so my aunt just said '2 million.' Since you're American, they all thought she meant U.S. dollars! Two million U.S. for dowry! No one's ever had such big face in Taiwan before!" ☉

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