

# Three-stage Marital Customs in Life: A Profile of the Yellow-costumed Wa People at Dazhai, Mengjian, Yunnan of China

Sheng Zhao

School of Humanity, Tiangong University, Tianjin, China.

648728719@qq.com

**Abstract.** The Wa ethnic people at Dazhai village of Mengjian township, Gengma Dai and Wa autonomous county, Lincang city, Yunnan province of China, are identified as “Yellow-costumed Wa People” by other ethnic groups nearby. Each couple from the Wa People experiences three weddings in life, namely the “initial wedding”, the “second wedding”, and the “tail-cutting (finalizing) wedding”. Such three-stage marital ceremonies may be completed over a span of several years or even decades. In most cases, it’s not uncommon to see the elderly couples aged 60 and above still hold their third wedding as newlyweds. The custom can be distinctive both among the ethnic minorities and those around the world. Translation of the unique marital custom from Chinese to foreign language and publicity of the custom elsewhere around the world is of great realistic significance to reach international audience through a full narration of China’s stories.

**Keywords:** Yellow-costumed Wa People; love and marital customs.

## 1. Introduction

The Wa ethnic people at Dazhai village, Mengjian township, Gengma Dai and Wa autonomous county, Lincang city, Yunnan province of China believe in Southern Buddhism. Their ethnic language and customs are quite different from those of other Wa branches. They are identified as the “Yellow-costumed Wa People” by neighboring ethnic groups for their yellowish-brown clothing. Their marital customs are unique with a long history. According to local marital customs, a Yellow-costumed Wa couple experiences three weddings in their life, in three stages: the initial wedding, the second wedding, and the “tail-cutting” (finalizing) wedding. Only when these three rituals have been held can the betrothed man and woman truly become a couple body and soul. Scholars at home and abroad have conducted in-depth research into the marital custom ranging from its origin, connotation, function to modern changes. However, translation of the marital custom from Chinese to foreign languages and its publicity abroad still remains unavailable. Therefore, the author translated the unique marital custom of the Yellow-costumed Wa People based on fieldwork and reference to the monograph *The Preserved Love and Marriage Tradition of the Wa Ethnic Group: the Wa People at Dazhai, Mengjian Township, Gengma County as a Case*. It is expected that more foreign readers, experts, and scholars understand this custom. And such a Chinese ethnic culture can be spread to other parts of the world through presentation of the love and marriage stories on ethnic minority groups in the country.

## 2. From Courtship to Engagement

The traditional marital custom of Yellow-costumed Wa People is unique from suitor selection to marriage completion.

## **2.1 “Dropping by the Maiden’s Home” — Courtship while Farming**

For Yellow-costumed Wa People, “dropping by the maiden’s home” means the courtship between man and woman. However, quite different from other ethnic groups, which tend to express love in either of the two forms (combing the lover’s hair while singing love songs and professing love by antiphonal singing in the moonlight), the Wa people court while offering manual labor.

If a young man falls in love with a maiden, he will drop in at her home at night. Whether the maiden knows him or not, his presence is welcome by the family with hospitality. After entering the home, instead of taking her away or talking to her in her boudoir, the young man will get to work such as chopping firewood, preparing pig’s foodstuff and husking rice in a wooden mortar to express his love by contributing manual labor.

Gradually, the maiden will select a young man to her liking as a fiancé, while other rivals will leave on their own initiative after she has made the decision and then “drop in on” any of other maidens. The unique custom of the Yellow-costumed Wa People is just practiced within their village from the same ethnic group. There is almost no one who get married to people from any other group, and even those who have landed secure office positions outside still go back to marry women in their village. Besides, consanguineous courtship (courtship between man and woman akin to each other) is banned clearly and strictly, as they believe that people in the same family clan, if they get married, may offend the Semeng god, the most powerful for Yellow-costumed Wa People, and result in strong gale or heavy rainstorm and thus destruct their farmland and village. They also have faith in that any marriage offending the practice should not be recognized by the public and their children will have no social status.

## **2.2 “Multiple Times of Road-paving and Bridging” —Complicated Rituals of Marriage Proposal and Engagement**

The custom of proposing, with complicated rituals, may be completed over a span of several years. Compared to the “multiple times of road-paving and bridging” by local people, the aforesaid rituals require a number of twists and turns upon completion.

If a young man loses his heart to a maiden, his parents will invite a matchmaker to the maiden’s home with cigarettes and alcohol at festivals, which aims to express the man’s sincere love to the maiden. It takes three years for the matchmaker to send such gifts, after which the parents of the maiden will consent to their courtship. From then on, both the man and the maiden should not “drop in on” any other partner of the opposite sex. Otherwise, they will be cursed by local people. After their establishment of courtship, the parents of the man will continuously request the matchmaker, on their behalf, to propose marriage with betrothal gifts at festivals. During the proposal, the parents of the maiden will not interfere in their daughter’s choice, but they may politely decline the matchmaker’s visits in some irrelevant words. According to the custom, only when the matchmaker has proposed three to six times will the maiden’s parents consent to the marriage. After that, both their parents will ask a Buddhist monk to set by divination a date proper and propitious for a wedding ceremony, to conclude the marriage proposal.

### 3. Three-stage Weddings in Life

#### 3.1 “Initial Wedding” — the Rituals of Getting Married

In China, a great number of ethnic minorities practice an initial wedding, which just symbolizes engagement. As for the Yellow-costumed Wa People, the initial wedding is celebrated in three days, already marking the marriage between man and woman, as a grand and festival occasion on a par with the formal wedding of other ethnic minorities.

The first day of the initial wedding is scheduled to invite guests to a grand feast. The man, his parents, and the matchmaker bring two packets of tea and cigarettes, four pairs of candles, and two kilograms of pork to the maiden’s parents while entertaining her relatives as well and inviting them to attend the follow-up wedding reception at the man’s home.

On the second day, to go fetching the bride for the wedding. On the morning of that day, the bridegroom, two matchmakers, and four worshipers (*Laibulai* in the Wa language) who recite the auspicious scriptures and blessings go together to meet the bride at her home and escort her back to the wedding at the bridegroom’s home. An escorting team enters the bride’s home, which, first of all, worships her ancestors and the Semeng god to inform them of the newlywed couple’s initial wedding and wish for their blessings. Then, after the couple kowtow to the ancestors and god, the four worshippers sprinkle rice to wish them good luck. Then the bridegroom takes the bride to his home. Upon arrival, the sacrifice-offering ritual is observed like that at the bride’s home. As of the afternoon of that day, guests are invited to a wedding reception. After the feast, they sing and dance in a circle, extending best wishes to the newlywed couple.

On the third day, to worship the Semeng god. The parents of the bridegroom and worshipers kill chickens at a designated site for a sacrificial ceremony, to inform the god of the initial wedding and pray for his recognition of their marriage and bless them with the conjugal love and household well-being.

Three days later, the wedding draws to a close, when the bridegroom returns to his wife’s home and lives with her family from then on. However, the bridegroom is not yet allowed to bring his wife and children back home until they have held the second wedding.

#### 3.2 “The Second Wedding” — the Marital Rituals of Returning Home

Following the initial wedding, the bridegroom of Yellow-costumed Wa People must still stay at his bride’s home together with her family. He is not allowed, by the custom, to bring his bride’s home until the second wedding is completed, which should not be held any time at will, but rather, meet two prerequisites: First, her parents’ consent to their second wedding; Second, the bride has enough money to hold the wedding. It is because of the essential prerequisites that the schedule of the second wedding differs from person to person. Some may hold it three to four years later, while for others, they may have to wait more than ten years or even decades after the initial wedding.

The second wedding is also celebrated in three days. On the first day, relatives and friends prepare for a feast at the bride’s home, and four worshipers are invited to recite

the auspicious scriptures and blessings at his home, to inform his ancestors and the Semen god of the second wedding in the hope of their blessings.

On the second day, the bridegroom and the escorting team go fetching the bride for the wedding with 3 kilograms of crops, rice and salt, a small amount of cash gifts (16 - 26 Chinese yuan) and half the port of the pig slaughtered at the bride's home. Upon arrival, worshipers chair a sacrificial ritual at the bride's home to inform her ancestors and the Semeng god of the couple's second wedding in the hope of their blessings. And then the man takes his wife home, during which the bride and her accompanying team take her dowry—a loom, to her husband's home holding up a flower umbrella. Following the end of the sacrifice-offering ritual at the man's home, the bride changes her appellation of the bridegroom's parents into "parents-in-law", after which the wife is formally allowed to live with her husband at his home.

On the third day, the husband's home appreciates the help of relatives and friends. Once the second wedding is completed, the wife starts to live with her husband at his home. However, even now, the woman is still seen as a "borrowed person" by the man's family and local people. To become a part of her husband's family, both the couple have to hold the "tail-cutting (finalizing) wedding.

### **3.3 "Tail-cutting Wedding"—to Finalize the Rituals of "Marriage Body and Soul"**

Apart from the same rituals as the second wedding, there is also another set of unique rituals required for the finalizing phase of the wedding.

The first day is scheduled to put up a wooden, temporary shed and go fetching the bride. The shed is built by the bridegroom's family at a crossing nearby with the help of relatives and friends. On that evening, the bride just stays overnight in the simply furnished shed. The next morning, the bridegroom, together with the guests as relatives and friends, a matchmaker and worshipers, goes fetching the bride. Lighting up the candles and placing alcohol and meat in the shed, worshipers honor the ancestors of the bride and the Semeng god to inform them of the "tail-cutting (finalizing) wedding", praying for their recognition of the couple's marriage bodies and souls. After that, the man brings his wife home, and worshipers practice the same rituals there to gain consent to the couple's final wedding from ancestors and the Semeng god.

On the second day, to sprinkle the water and place sacrifice offerings. After worshipping at home, the couple take sacrifice offerings to a local Buddhist temple, ask the Buddhist monk to inform their ancestors of both sides, finalize their marriage, and request the ancestors to vouchsafe the bride body and soul to the bridegroom.

On the third day, to do manual labor. The couple go up some hilltop to chop firewood, which is a symbol of their diligence and bravery.

After the three stages of celebration, the bride and her bridegroom's wedding is finalized, and the bride formally becomes the bridegroom's family member. Accordingly, she is also allowed to be buried at her husband's family graveyard after her death, and their children can be considered members of the man's family enjoying all the rights entailing the kinship.

#### 4. Conclusion

The decades-long wedding of Yellow-costumed Wa People presents several typical features in their love and marital customs: monogamy, avoidance of marriage to the suitor surnamed the same, and the taboo on unmarried pregnancy. Their distinctive way of courtship, the complicated and time-consuming marriage proposal rituals, and the uncertain times of their wedding ceremonies. Besides, no matter how long they've spent living at the bride's home, they pursue the ultimate goal of living at the bridegroom's home. Meanwhile, the religious culture suffuses the marital customs and their marriage in life is underpinned by conjugal love and household well-being.

Along with the social, economic and living changes over time, enormous transformations also take place in the love and marriage customs of Yellow-costumed Wa People at Dazhai village, Mengjian township, Gengma Dai and Wa autonomous county, Lincang city, Yunnan province of China. For example, their courtship forms has been diversified, the intermarriage circle expanded, and the cases of marriage among the inner-groups and the outer-groups increased. Moreover, the custom of the bridegroom's living with the bride after the second wedding also shifted. Regardless of such changes, the concept of a strong family bond and interconnectedness of hearts are still deeply rooted amid the people. The "tail-cutting (finalizing) wedding" still remains a holy ritual for the Wa ethnic people. Today, when walking into the Dazhai village of Mengjian township, we may be amazed by the unique scene where an aged couple, despite their gray hair and wrinkly faces, still hold their final wedding in life.

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