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## Book Reviews

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Bonnie Adrian (2003) *Framing the Bride- Globalizing Beauty and Romance in Taiwan's Bridal Industry*, Berkeley: University of California Press. ISBN: 0- 520-23834-6

### **Aybige Yilmaz**

Communication and Media Research Institute  
University of Westminster

White weddings, once a legacy of Victorian England but now a global phenomenon familiar to many brides across the world, can provide the material for the most engaging academic studies, as Bonnie Adrian's book once again shows us. This is not surprising, given the wonderful richness of the data that can not only reveal local interpretations of what entails the "perfect white wedding", but also lay out the basic essentials: the expensive white dresses, the extravagant ceremonies, the bridal industries that flourish around them, and the central role they play in people's lives.

For all their romantic significance, it would be quite unrealistic to consider these opulent weddings outside the context of consumer culture, and cherish them as emotional celebrations of a rite of passage only- in fact, they have often attracted considerable academic criticism for being yet another exploitative tool of Western capitalism, along with the fashion or beauty industry. Therefore Adrian's book is not the first one that I have read on this subject. Condemning western culture's obsession with white weddings, Ingraham (1999) had tried to expose the heterosexual capitalist ideology hiding behind all the fabulous white gowns, diamond rings, the romantic love and lavish flower decorations. Studying the modernization process through the changing wedding rituals in Cyprus, Agryrou (1996) had directed a similarly strong criticism to the Greek Cypriot weddings in urban centres, where he argued that the Cypriot bourgeoisie was legitimising its class distinction by holding the more modern, more Western 'champagne' weddings at fancy hotels, rather than the traditional village weddings. This, for the writer, not only reproduced social inequalities within the society, but also led to the

'symbolic domination of the West'. Both engaging and illuminating as these books are, the writers had concentrated on systems of domination and exploitation, which would leave me wondering why the most important actors, the brides, were not in the picture. And that is what I found most remarkable about Bonnie Adrian's work.

In fact, Adrian documents the perfect data from Taiwan, which could easily have been read within a similar framework: the victimization of Taiwanese brides at the hands of a global consumer culture emanating from the West. What has fascinated the writer -and will undoubtedly be the case for the readers unaccustomed to Taiwan's modern wedding celebrations- is the way in which couples can pay a fortune to have enormous bridal photo albums prepared prior to the wedding. These albums, with pictures taken at different settings and backdrops, couples posing romantically for the camera, are to be displayed at the wedding banquets. A selected photo or two from the albums would be enlarged into near life sizes, again for display during the event, and later to decorate the bedroom walls of the couples. (As for the photos taken during the ceremony, they would be left inside their free plastic Kodak albums, inside one of the drawers.)

Still, the most striking thing is the metamorphosis of the bride in this process. For these photos, the bride-to-be is dressed in various wedding and evening gowns, and transformed beyond recognition by the photographers, make-up artists and stylists through an arduous three-hour long makeover. In the meanwhile, the groom is saved all this effort to look as natural as possible (even be permitted to keep his glasses on), and he can get away with changing only two or three outfits. The photographs of the bride are then further airbrushed to achieve the perfect look. Then, as a final touch, some pictures are decorated with graphics and texts, mostly in English. These texts often have spelling or grammar errors, or include phrases like '*Making of Special*' or '*Fervent Love Soul*' (p.25, 70) that make no sense at all- which would bother a Western eye, especially given the fact that the whole process can easily cost thousands of pounds. Yet, as the writer finds out to her surprise, to the Taiwanese couples this does not matter much, for nobody is really interested in the actual content of the texts. These writings are placed on the photographs solely as visual aids to transform the image of the would-be bride as closely as possible into the image of a beautiful celebrity or model on the cover of any fashion magazine, or simply posing for a fashion product ad. As a result, the transformation of the bride is so dramatic that, her children in the future may not recognize their mother from the photographs, while the father will remain perfectly identifiable.

Through the chapters, Bonnie Adrian describes this process in exquisite detail, providing pictures of the bridal photographs. She even goes through the bridal makeover herself, and courageously poses in front of the cameras, while also

explaining and contextualising the workings of contemporary Taiwanese bridal industry. However, in doing so, she avoids seeing these as mere evidence for a much-lamented global consumer culture that serves Western imperialist interests, causing Taiwan to lose its unique culture. Adrian offers to see the subjects of her study not as victims but as quite strong actors in globalisation, and argues that globalisation does not simply 'happen *to* people, it happens *by* people' (p.11). The story of the transformed brides, as the readers will find out, is not what it might seem to outsiders. By explaining the specific cultural meanings and emotional significance these photographs carry for the Taiwanese brides, the author analyses how the global images offered by the transnational beauty industry are rewritten and made authentic in Taiwan. With that, the author clearly puts the brides back into the picture, and dismisses any arguments about colonization of Taiwan and their women: 'Because the photographs appropriate the West for local purposes of creating prestige and meaning in globalizing Taiwan, it would probably be more accurate to argue that young women in Taiwan colonize the West through their photographs than vice versa' (p.207).

With its interesting subject matter, and the way Adrian tells the story of Taiwanese brides with wit and humour, while exposing the problems inherent in the Westernisation arguments, I find this book highly recommendable to anyone interested in globalisation debates.

### **References**

- Argyrou, Vassos (1996) *Tradition and Modernity in the Mediterranean: the Wedding as Symbolic Struggle*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ingraham, Chrys (1999) *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture*, New York: Routledge.