

# Framings

Taiwanese bridal photography captured my curiosity on the first glance. I was Hui-zhu's English tutor, visiting her at home weekly to help her practice English conversation skills. This was in 1993, when I lived in Taipei for a year, studying Mandarin Chinese at a local university and supporting myself by teaching English. After several weeks of lengthy conversations on a variety of subjects, Hui-zhu and I were becoming well acquainted. One day, I passed by her bedroom and looked inside. Centered directly above her full-size bed hung an enormous portrait of a bride in a white gown and a groom in a tuxedo, framed in ornately carved, gold-painted wood. I paused. The bride, I thought, looked nothing like Hui-zhu. Who could she be? The three-foot-tall portrait was a familiar enough object, but its placement here in Taipei, hanging above a young couple's bed, was disorienting. It looked, to me, like something that belonged in a museum or a castle, not in a modern Taipei flat.

I went back to the den to ask Hui-zhu about this wall hanging. Who is that in the picture? Is it a painting or a photograph? She took me back to her bedroom and explained it was her "wedding photo." I could not believe my eyes. Hui-zhu had been married less than a year before. How could she possibly have looked like that? Why, I wondered, would she want this photograph that looked nothing like her, that made her look like a generic Beautiful Bride—soft and sweet, so different from her everyday tough appearance and attitude? Recently married myself, I knew that if I had ordered a photograph of that size from my wedding

photographer, it would have cost over a thousand dollars. Why would Hui-zhu and her husband want a larger-than-life photograph of themselves framed in ornately carved, gold-painted wood? And why would they hang it over their bed, of all places?

Back in the den, Hui-zhu took out an enormous and extremely heavy album of bridal photographs. With each turn of a page, I was more baffled. Each page featured a fifteen-inch-high photograph, large enough (by my standards) to be a framed wall hanging itself. The photographs showed the bride and groom dressed in numerous costumes. She appeared in white, pink, yellow, blue, and red formal evening gowns with fitted bodices and puffy skirting. He wore a Western business suit, a black tuxedo with tails, a white tuxedo with blue cummerbund to match the bride's blue dress. Some photographs were decorated with graphic designs along the edges and featured English text, some of it nonsensical and misspelled. Overlaid on one romantic photograph was a poem about a forlorn lover whose beloved had left him. After flipping through the album's forty or so portraits, I wondered about photos of the bride and groom's families. Page after page featured pictures of the couple or of the bride alone—close-ups, full-body shots, photos taken against a studio backdrop, photos taken in a flower garden—but their families were nowhere to be seen. I had so many questions running through my mind that I could not ask them all. When did you cut off your long hair? Did the photographer retouch the photographs to remove the mole from your cheek? Retouching, the cash register in my mind took note, adds exponentially to the expense of wedding photographs in the United States.

Hui-zhu became *my* teacher that day, which turned out to be the start of my multiyear engagement with bridal photography. She told me that the photographs had cost a total of about \$2,000 U.S., that they were indeed retouched, and that she had worn a wig. In response to my queries about family members' photos, Hui-zhu took out several small books of four-by-six-inch snapshots stored in plastic sleeves. She showed me pictures of her parents and siblings, and her husband's parents and siblings, in addition to grandparents and various aunts and uncles at her wedding ceremonies and banquet. They were absent from the larger, more formal photo album but were by no means absent from her life. In fact, the wedding photos<sup>1</sup> and my questions prompted Hui-zhu to tell me about problems with her in-laws.

Hui-zhu had met her husband, Zhi-xiu, at work. He is a middle manager and she is an executive secretary for a successful, medium-sized local company. Both are college-educated. Hui-zhu's father is a successful

lawyer, her mother a homemaker and instructor of Japanese-style flower-arranging arts. Zhi-xiu's father is a wealthy entrepreneur, his mother a lay devotee of Buddhism who spends much of her time organizing philanthropic projects with other women from her temple. Zhi-xiu is their eldest son. Before the wedding, Zhi-xiu's parents purchased a spacious three-bedroom, two-bath apartment and renovated it for the couple. Hui-zhu and Zhi-xiu were to pay monthly rent to his parents, which would cover the monthly mortgage payments. The couple was allowed to select paint colors, bathroom tiles, plumbing and light fixtures, and household appliances, including a costly Japanese air conditioning system to tame Taipei's fiercely hot and humid climate. An allowance from Hui-zhu's parents permitted the couple to appoint their home with stylish furniture, area rugs, electronic equipment, and other furnishings. Zhi-xiu's parents, who had put down deposit money on the flat, retained ownership of the property.

Hui-zhu had recently stopped using birth control in response to pressure from her husband's mother and grandmother, which began shortly after the wedding, to get pregnant. She told me that she was reluctant to become a mother for fear of losing her job, where she worked long hours and held much responsibility, but she could no longer endure the pressure from her in-laws. She was extremely frustrated by this and many other demands that Zhi-xiu's family made upon her. The Tomb Sweeping holiday—a time for tending family gravesites and making offerings of food and paper money to the dead—had recently passed. Hui-zhu complained that her mother-in-law had assigned her the task of preparing numerous dishes to offer to Zhi-xiu's ancestors. Hui-zhu spent an entire day cooking under the watchful, domineering command of her husband's grandmother while her mother-in-law worked on a project for her temple. The grandmother was too frail to do the cooking herself but sharp-minded enough to exact control over Hui-zhu's every move in the kitchen.

Hui-zhu's complaints did not stop there, however. Shortly after she and her husband had moved into their beautiful modern apartment, her in-laws had announced that when Zhi-xiu's younger brother married, he and his future wife would live in the apartment too.<sup>2</sup> They had let Hui-zhu and Zhi-xiu believe they would live independently as a modern, nuclear family (*xiaojiating*), and their choices when arranging the apartment had reflected that assumption. They occupied the master bedroom. The other bedrooms served as a home office and a television-equipped den. All of their furnishings were modern-style and light-colored (in con-

trast to the dark colors and dim, fluorescent lighting of most older Taiwanese homes). Their kitchen was twice the size of most old-style kitchens and—rare even in Taipei—featured a General Electric dishwasher and a Maytag clothes washer and dryer. Hui-zhu's in-laws had laid out a lot of money for the apartment, so Zhi-xiu felt he could not protest. Besides, he was the first-born son, and filiality had been ingrained in him since early childhood. Hui-zhu believed their only hope for keeping the apartment as their own was if her brother-in-law refused the arrangement when the time came for him to marry.

The enormous portrait hanging over the bed and the bridal album kept in the den clearly represented Hui-zhu and Zhi-xiu's marriage in individualistic, romantic terms. In the photos conjugality took precedence over extended family in the same way generic bridal beauty took precedence over Hui-zhu's real-life looks. The circumstances of their married life, however, suggest that they were far less independent of family than Hui-zhu had hoped. The fantasy world depicted in their photographs was fractured before Hui-zhu and Zhi-xiu reached their first anniversary.

#### METHODS AND SUBJECTS

I first saw Hui-zhu's wedding photographs during my year's study in Taiwan in 1993. On subsequent summer language-study trips I encountered such photographs again. At my first Taiwanese wedding banquet (*xiyan*) the next year I learned that bridal portraits are taken in advance of weddings and displayed at wedding banquets. The following year I attended my first countryside wedding banquet, held under a tent across the way from the groom's family home, and found the rural couple's bridal photographs even larger and more elaborate than those I had seen in Taipei. In fact, bridal albums and wall hangings similar to Hui-zhu's have adorned the entryway to nearly every wedding banquet in Taiwan since the early 1990s. Now the framed portraits hang above these couples' beds and the hefty albums are tucked away for their future children and grandchildren to admire. Intrigued, in 1996–1997, I conducted anthropological field research in and around Taipei's bridal industry to discover why this new cultural practice is so popular and what it reveals about marriage and families.

The best place to study Taiwanese bridal photographs, I reasoned, was in the bridal salons (*hunsha sheying gongsi*) that produce them. My first forays into these salons were unsuccessful; curt saleswomen brushed me

off and refused to put me in contact with salon owners. The process of working my way in, though frustrating, turned out to be revealing. I called many old friends, teachers, and acquaintances from previous stays in Taipei and asked for help in locating contacts in the bridal industry.<sup>3</sup> I also introduced myself to neighbors I met in the supermarket, on the street, at the morning fresh foods market, and in playgrounds. New and old acquaintances of every sort introduced me to soon-to-be-photographed and newly married couples who talked to me about their photographs and bridal salon experiences. Various friends and acquaintances took me along as their guest to wedding banquets, where the products of the bridal industry—costly gowns and photographs—were inevitably displayed. I attended consumer bridal fairs, introducing myself to salon managers and photographers. I was granted some salon tours and even some interviews, but still, bridal salon staff kept me at a distance.

I persisted, and one day I got lucky. I had called the office of a local bridal magazine, asking to interview magazine staff about the bridal photography industry. When the editor, Qiu Li-ru, took my call, I explained that I was an American doctoral candidate from Yale University studying modern weddings and that I would like to interview her. She refused to grant me an interview but complained that she was badly in need of an English teacher. She explained that the magazines she was editing (a fashion magazine, a celebrity gossip magazine, and the bridal magazine) must have English headlines in them and that these often contained errors.<sup>4</sup> Her boss had admonished her to improve her English. I met her for lunch the next day and refused to accept money for the English lessons. As payment, I told her, I wanted help making contacts inside the bridal industry. Li-ru turned out to be too preoccupied to commit to regular English lessons after several weeks, but one of her underlings, Xiao-lan, took her place as my student. We met once a week for English conversation and American coffee. Xiao-lan's already excellent English skills permitted basic conversations, and our "lessons" often revolved around my research interests, as these were her business interests as well. Xiao-lan forged many initial research connections for me. She called bridal salon owners, dress designers, photographers, and stylists with whom she had recently worked on magazine layouts, arranging interviews for me. She also took me along with her on magazine shoots (many took place at bridal salons, with bridal stylists and photographers working on professional models paid for by the magazine). During these shoots, Xiao-lan often sat down with me and a bridal salon owner or employee and helped me conduct interviews. Suddenly, through her sponsorship, the

guarded doors of Taipei's bridal salons flew open for me. Saleswomen, stylists, photographers, and owners cheerfully welcomed me, introduced me around in their circles, and forged more and more contacts for me. Xiao-lan and I met at least once a week for most of the year, even after my research schedule filled up and overflowed with all of the interview and observation opportunities she helped me make.

I wondered, though, why it had been so difficult for me to get an “in” without Xiao-lan. As an American with blue eyes, fair skin, and curly, reddish-brown hair, I was used to enjoying a special status in Taipei. Strangers were curious about me. People often struck up conversations with me on the street, in buses, in shops. During my first year in Taiwan, I found the attention exhausting and missed the quiet anonymity that crowded public spaces afford at home. Very often, once locals heard me speak Chinese, I became an object of intense, curious scrutiny and received invitations, aid, and small gifts of many sorts. Although every Taipei resident has seen Euro-Americans not only on television but around and about the city, many had never before met one who could really speak Chinese (and therefore answer their litany of questions about the United States and adjustment to life in Taiwan). I studied standard Mandarin in college and at three different language programs in Taipei, where all of my teachers taught a Beijing accent and its “standard” grammar—even those teachers who had never set foot in Beijing. The Beijing accent sounds foreign to most Taiwanese.<sup>5</sup> Once I began preparing for field research, I worked at cultivating a Taiwanese accent and using the “incorrect” grammatical forms and pronunciations spoken by people in Taiwan—much to my teachers’ dismay. I studied Taiwanese briefly, such that I understood bits of Taiwanese conversations and spoke enough that I could flourish a few phrases when I wanted to demonstrate my commitment to Taiwan as unique place distinct from China.<sup>6</sup> (Readers unfamiliar with the history of Taiwan and its differences from and with China will benefit from careful attention to the primer on Taiwan’s history given in chapter 1.) My Taiwanese-ified Mandarin was a huge hit with people in Taiwan, and I was accustomed to charming my way through all kinds of social interactions and cultural faux pas. Why had my experience with bridal salon saleswomen been so different?

Xiao-lan explained that due to intense competition in the bridal industry, saleswomen were instructed to protect their salons from intruders. Ten years previously, bridal salon owners had been extremely successful. There were fewer salons then, and as the use of bridal salon services became nearly universal among the to-be-married, business had been

phenomenal. Salon owners—many of them photographers who had received only a vocational high school education—became fabulously wealthy overnight. News of their successes caught on, and more entrepreneurs opened salons of their own. In fact, bridal salons had proliferated too quickly; now competition was intense. Salons competed not only over ways to draw in new customers, but also over experienced bridal salon employees.

The competition, moreover, has an international scope. Taiwan-style bridal salons were being opened throughout the region, especially in the People's Republic of China, but also in Korea, Japan, and in Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. Bridal salons with close Taiwan connections also exist in New York (Flushing), San Francisco, Los Angeles, Vancouver, and other North American cities. Chinese, Korean, and Japanese entrepreneurs eager to repeat the successes of the Taiwanese bridal industry avidly consume books, courses, and supplies (photo album covers, studio backdrops) from Taiwan. Many owners of salons in Taiwan have opened bridal salons in the People's Republic of China and today have their hopes for great fortunes pinned to those investments rather than to their local salons.

Xiao-lan surmised that I had been treated with high suspicion because owners instruct sales staff to keep out all noncustomers for fear that they are industry spies. Even with Xiao-lan to introduce me as an anthropologist, salon owners and photographers continued to assume that I intended to open a bridal salon of my own once I finished my doctoral degree. Many anthropologists have been suspected of being CIA agents, development workers, or missionaries in disguise. That the bridal salon owner's worst fear is industrial espionage by an American posing as an anthropologist is telling. It speaks to the self-confidence that some people in Taiwan can enjoy in globalizing processes, including the one that this book presents. Once it was established that, indeed, I was just an anthropologist in pursuit of a doctoral degree, people in Taipei accorded me the same treatment that local students receive: pity and respect. Students are respected because their work is honored, but pitied because their long work hours and meager budgets are looked upon as "bitter." Whereas many North American anthropologists working in poor countries tell of the pressures locals place upon them to offer gifts beyond what their research budgets allow, my experience was just the opposite: I had to fight to pay for meals, even when I had invited another for a lunchtime interview. "You're a student," interviewees would argue, "you don't have any money!" Educational degrees are a major marker of status in

Taiwan. Some of the people I interviewed outside the bridal industry seemed to be willing to aid me in my research efforts not so much because they took interest in my project but because they wanted to assist a student in the pursuit of a degree.

I conducted interview and observation research in about three dozen Taipei salons, plus some in Taoyuan city, Taichung city and county, and the city of Tainan. My salon-based research consisted of informal interviewing, formal interviews, and participant observation research in the various salon departments (sales, gowns, makeovers, photo sessions, and retouching/graphics work). When I could do so without intruding upon the smooth functioning of business, I also casually interviewed couples as they moved through the bridal photography production process. One very generous salon owner, Manager Huang, offered to make me a bridal album to commemorate my fieldwork and, hence, provided me with the experience of direct participation in being made over and photographed. In exchange, she asked if I would mind if a copy of the album were used as one of the salon's dozens of sample albums on display for customers.

I engaged in numerous research activities related to the production of bridal photographs and their social contexts outside bridal salons, too. I interviewed photographers, stylists, and owners of glamour photography (*yishuzhao*) studios that produce glamour photographs for unmarried young women and girls similar to those shot in bridal salons. I also tracked down a photographer whose small studio specialized in glamorizing portraits of young men and gay or lesbian couples.<sup>7</sup> I took beauty school classes and interviewed beauty teachers to learn more about makeovers. I interviewed photography teachers to learn more about photography. I visited dress factories and interviewed bridal gown designers to learn more about that end of the bridal industry and its early roots in producing wedding gowns for export to the United States. I observed professional modeling shoots to compare them to bridal shoots and interviewed several models and a modeling business owner to learn more about the broader beauty scene and its emphasis on Caucasian models. I interviewed local employees of a multinational fashion magazine headquartered in Paris. I talked to a marketing survey research firm manager and was treated to lunch by an expatriate executive for a multinational cosmetic company, who talked about the Taiwan market for beauty products and how it has changed over time. Finally, I conducted archival research on weddings and photography at a variety of research and archive collections.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to these site-specific research activities, I used a snowball

sampling technique to gain interviews with recently married couples and to learn about the consumption of bridal photography. Whenever I met someone who was recently or soon to be married, or close to someone in that category, I not only asked questions but asked to be introduced to others. I sought out couples willing to bring me along on their photo shoots to gain participant observation experiences in a variety of bridal salons. I attended many wedding banquets. I relied on previous contacts and neighbors to help me arrange many of these, but I also generated many new contacts through bridal salon employees and women I met in beauty school classes, in department stores, and at markets. To hear numerous and varied opinions on general matters regarding bridal photography, marriage, and family, I chatted up strangers and acquaintances nearly everywhere I went. Accustomed to being approached by curious strangers at bus stops, in stores, and at restaurants who wanted to learn more about me as a foreigner, I began to turn these brief interactions into research opportunities. I learned to quickly explain my purpose for being in Taiwan and to ask questions such as “Did you have bridal photographs taken when you got married? Why?” or “I hear the divorce rate in Taiwan is getting higher; why do you think that is?” I changed my standard questions for these on-the-spot interviews from week to week, covering questions that emerged from my research. I sought out the perspectives of old people (the parents and grandparents of newlyweds when possible, but also other old people who lived in my neighborhood and had married children whom I had not met). I also made special efforts to track down women and men who had *not* had bridal photographs taken at the time of their marriage. These are the experiences from which this book grew.

Ethnographic research requires the researcher to develop deep familiarity with research subjects, to participate directly in their everyday lives. I relied on certain key “informants,” many of whom grew to be much more than research subjects to me. These include two stylists, two dress designers, several saleswomen and sales managers, six photographers, three salon owners, two bridal magazine editors, several mothers of married children, and perhaps a dozen young women who were single or recently married. These women and men provided me with detailed and vivid accounts of the bridal business and of marriage and, whenever possible, allowed me to shadow them at work and invited me to spend time with their friends and family. I cross-checked what I learned from these folks in interviews with others and confirmed (or contradicted) much of what they said with participant observation data. In this book, I use

pseudonyms when discussing all of the men and women I worked with, and I alter aspects of their stories to disguise their identities. Some, especially photographers, talked to me, in part, out of their interests in publicity. I use their real names selectively, only where acknowledging an individual's art or achievement is appropriate.

#### GLOBALIZATION AND THE BRIDAL PHOTOGRAPH

Observers might look upon Taiwanese bridal photographs, with their Victorian-inspired wedding gowns, tuxedos, and mass-media-inspired poses, as evidence of Taiwan's Westernization. The move toward the individualistic pursuit of romantic pleasures in marriage and the demphasis on extended kin ties, too, looks like Westernization. Taipei residents themselves, even, talk about bridal photography in this fashion. There are too many problems with this analysis, however. "Westernization" does not accurately capture the complexities of Taiwanese bridal photography, and besides, the very concept of Westernization does not stand up to rigorous analysis. Hui-zhu's experience of marriage was Westernized more on the surface than in substance.

Photographs often lie, and not just in Taiwan. Family photography in Europe and North America grew in popularity in lockstep with the demise of the interdependence of extended family members. Photography became a "rite of family life" and photographs became tokens of family unity because real-life experiences of extended family unity were increasingly rare (Sontag 1977: 8–9; see also Bourdieu 1990). Photography is prized not for its ability to capture lived experience but for its capacity to create "memories" markedly different from the goings-on of everyday life. The photographs on display on my mantel are certainly not typical of my life. They do not picture me at activities such as eating, working, and sleeping. Instead, they picture rare moments, such as vacations, weddings, and gatherings of extended kin. If an anthropologist from Taiwan came to my house and took the photographs as representative of my life, she would be mistaken.

Given the propensity for photography to focus on that which is uncommon, perhaps Taiwanese bridal photography's focus on individualistic pursuits of beauty and romance bodes well for the state of the extended family there. If extended kin are absent from their photographs, it stands to reason that they may be very much present in young couples' lives. Similarly, the photographic focus on the bride seems to suggest, on the surface, that women predominate in marriage. The eleva-

tion of the bride—not only above the groom but also to the heights of celebrity status—contrasts with the widespread cultural belief in Taiwan that marriage constitutes a downward movement in status for women. Many view the photographs as the bride’s “last time” to enjoy high status as a young, attractive, independent woman before she becomes burdened by household work and familial demands. The substance belies the surface in Taiwanese bridal photography. Much more is going on *around* the photographs than *in* them, as the ethnography that follows reveals.

As an explanatory framework, “Westernization” is not able to handle the ethnographic facts of Taiwanese bridal photography. One of the problems with the term is that it skirts the heart of the issue: the globalizing reaches of capitalism, a set of processes dominated (though never entirely controlled) by multinational corporations, many of which are based in the United States. Upon closer inspection, the problem is not merely cultural, as Westernization suggests, but political and economic. Many go so far as to speak of “cultural imperialism.” The idea of cultural imperialism is that U.S. domination of globalizing processes leads native peoples to abandon their traditional cultural practices to consume Hollywood movies and McDonald’s fries.<sup>9</sup> In this understanding, globalization engulfs the local. It is important, however, to remember that globalization does not only happen *to* people; it happens *by* people. Global capital requires national governments to pave its way—through state repression of labor organizing activities, for example, as was the case in Taiwan. Taiwan’s export-substitution strategy of economic national development made the “Made in Taiwan” label ubiquitous in North America. Global capitalism did not simply arrive on Taiwan’s shores and engulf the island; Taiwan actively courted and absorbed global capitalism into its fold (see Yang 2000). Its clamoring for admission to the World Trade Organization is a case in point. Nor did multinational capitalists simply swallow Taiwan once on shore. Corporations were forced to localize their practices in order to wrest labor away from Taiwanese family farms and enterprises (Kung 1983; Ong 1987 describes a similar case for Malaysia). Taiwan having transformed itself from a poor agrarian country to a wealthy industrialized one, the next wave of multinational corporations sought the island out not for its labor but for its consumers. Corporations like McDonald’s and Coca-Cola had to localize, tailoring their business practices, goods, services, and marketing strategies for the Taiwan market (see Watson 1997: 10–14; Wilson and Dissanayake 1996: 4).

On the surface, photographs like Hui-zhu’s depict a Taiwan that has

lost its uniqueness, gone Western. The ways in which the photos are Western, however, are complex and full of Taiwanese agency. Taiwan's bridal industry and its consumers appropriate key symbols of the West from transnationally circulating mass media and put them to their own uses. In so doing, young women and men in Taiwan domesticate the West and localize the global, as do people, young and old, all over the world (e.g., see Tobin 1992; Tomlinson 1991). Taiwanese bridal photography is an important case study in globalization because it reveals not only how people receive and decode mass media images that traverse the globe but also how young people in Taiwan talk back to global capitalism and bring it into *their* world. Bridal industry producers and consumers are neither resisting global capitalism nor being victimized by it. They *are* it; they are globalizing Taiwan in their very actions.

It is more accurate, then, to understand Taiwan as consuming global capitalism than as consumed by it. Globalization is a set of processes, human processes—constantly being made, unmade, and remade by human actors. By describing globalization as a machine that is somehow larger than life—beyond the control of human hands and human intelligence and all encompassing—we unwittingly contribute to the political/economic strength of the multinational corporations whose interests dominate key globalizing processes (Gibson-Graham 1996). Multinational cosmetics companies—take Revlon, for example—engage in globalization when they deploy visual images created in New York advertising firms to bolster demand for cosmetic products in Taiwan. Women like Hui-zhu, however, also engage in globalization when they deploy cosmetics in bridal portraits that emulate the poses and backgrounds featured in transnational Revlon advertisements. Clearly, Hui-zhu and Revlon are not equal players in the processes of globalization. Yet to dismiss the globalizing activities of Taiwan's bridal photography industry and its consumers is to dismiss too much. Multinational cosmetics companies “encode” their advertising messages for a desired response but ultimately have little control over how people interpret their messages, let alone over how they respond in action (see Hall 1980). It turns out that women like Hui-zhu, upon viewing a Revlon billboard, are much more likely to buy a bridal photograph composed of the same pose, background, and quality of focus than they are to purchase the latest shade of green eye shadow. Hui-zhu globalizes even as she is globalized.

Discussion of Westernization and cultural imperialism is often born of fears of a homogenous global village to come, where people the world over work in the same companies, live in the same nuclear family house-

holds, wear the same clothes, rely on the same Internet sites, and eat the same foods. These fears—which critic John Tomlinson argues are primarily European and North American worries about maintaining a rich array of “ethnic” consumer goods for decoration purposes—are misinformed. People the world over are domesticating the American television shows, movies, and restaurants that show up in their neighborhoods. They arrive at radically different understandings of *Dallas* episodes, and they turn McDonald’s into youth activity centers where customers linger for hours over fries, taking the “fast” out of fast food (Liebes and Katz 1990; Watson 1997). Globalization brings about new modes of diversification because the peoples of Tokyo, Cairo, and Mexico City engage in globalization in myriad ways that produce hybridized modernities (Canclini 1995), not one big McWorld.<sup>10</sup>

Westernization is more than fear of a future devoid of beautiful ethnic crafts and clothing to decorate the homes and bodies of the world’s wealthy; Westernization is also a long-standing fantasy about the place of the West in human history. Observing the breathtaking diversity of human beliefs and practices found worldwide, powerful Europeans came to make sense of what was spatial diversity through temporal stories (see Errington 1998; Fabian 1983). Cultural differences, though coexisting, were placed on hierarchical scales that labeled some peoples backward, stuck in the past, primitive, and barbaric while assuming the European storytellers to be the apex of human development. Europeans (and others) fantasized that they knew the future of all the backward peoples of the world: They were going to repeat European history and end up more or less just like modern Europeans and North Americans. Modernization theory imagined non-Western peoples catching up with Europe by replicating its historical trajectory and called this process “development” (see Escobar 1995).

Many of the victims of such thinking probably saw through its illogic and arrogance long ago, but it took intellectuals with Western educational training to articulate and deliver the lesson now known as post-colonial theory: Europe and its progeny outside Europe are not the center and apex of humanity by natural right but by political/economic might (see Chakrabarty 2000). European historical experience is not universal; it is every bit as particularistic or “provincial” as every other people’s history. By the time this message sank in among intellectuals, however, the fantasy of modernization was no longer mere fantasy. Explicit national policy in post-World War II Taiwan aimed to develop the country according to modernization theory’s blueprint of industrialized capitalis-

tic production and its assumed accoutrements like love marriages and nuclear families. Given first European and now U.S. domination in globalization, no nation can industrialize, modernize, globalize without reference to Eurocentric visions of what counts as modernity. The fantasy of a modernized world that is, at core, accessible to multinational capital—the ability to sell everyone a Coke—today is not just fantasy; it is a political and economic project well underway. Globalization is not new; it began at least four hundred years ago (Wolf 1982). Most agree, however, that its rapid pace and its domination by comparatively few global powers in the past fifty years are historically unique and uniquely disconcerting. Under these conditions, worries about cultural imperialism are what Renato Rosaldo (1989) calls “imperialist nostalgia”—nostalgia for that which one has just destroyed.

Worries about Westernization, then, are misplaced though well-founded. Clearly Taiwanese bridal photographs have something to do with the West. How else can one account for the Victorian-inspired white gowns and veils? My point is that “Westernization” is an imprecise concept, based on false premises and arrogant views of those outside the West. To the extent that Taiwan can be said to be engaged in a process of Westernization, this is not inevitable, not predictable, and not as complete or totalizing as the notion of Westernization suggests.

What, or where, *is* the West, anyway? The “uniqueness of the West” is a cultural construct that overlooks similarities in societies found across continents and greatly exaggerates the pervasiveness of individualism and capitalism in Western Europe, while underestimating the significance of individualism and capitalism in Asian history (Goody 1996; see also Frank 1998). “The West” also assumes there is a discrete, stable, unified entity—the West—while in practice this is not so. The vast network of transnational flows of goods, people, and ideas facilitated by modern air travel and electronic media renders the notion of a distinct, discrete West absurd. Transnational flows circulate in every direction (Appadurai 1991). People regularly eat Chinese food in Rome and wear Italian shoes in Taipei. Just as ideologies of romance and standards of beauty developed in New York advertising firms and Hollywood production studios have taken on lives of their own in Taiwan, Chinese cultural practices like Feng-shui and acupuncture have taken on lives of their own in New York and Los Angeles (not to mention Toronto and St. Louis). Victorian-inspired bridal wear in Taiwan and the Chinese medicine college in Santa Fe are both simultaneously Western and Chinese, casting doubt on the usefulness of these categories.

Yet it is difficult to let go of these conceptualizations. In writing this book, I often struggled to find a more precise, more accurate term than “Western.” I tried writing “Western European and North American” only to realize that this phrasing left out Australia and New Zealand, which in Taiwan are important Western places. Johannesburg, too, has been an important player in Taiwan and is regarded there as very much Western. I tried “Western Europe and its former colonies.” This phrase seems much too heavy a substitute for “Western” in the phrase “Western-style bridal gown,” however. Besides, my maternal grandparents emigrated to the United States from Eastern Europe nearly a century ago. Am I, like millions of other American, British, and French citizens, not Western? The more one inquires into “the West,” the more clearly one sees that it is a problematic label, though a powerful one. Though inadequate, it is indispensable.<sup>11</sup>

“The West” is a powerful label precisely because the transnational flows of goods, people, and ideas that we call globalization are not conducted in a balanced or egalitarian fashion. Multinational corporations headquartered in North America, Western Europe, and Japan orchestrate much of that capital and dominate many conduits for the traffic of globalization. Hollywood film production companies rely on the sheer weight of their enormous capital investments to marginalize the significance of competitors. Few Chinese or Taiwanese films can meet the high production standards and spectacular visual effects that cosmopolitan viewers in Taipei have been conditioned to expect when they go to the movies. American advertising firms set the bar for ad photography in Taipei and other “global cities,” including those in Western Europe (Sassen 1991). Already Western, the French need not worry about Westernization, though *American-ization* is of great concern.

The power imbalances that drive globalization are precisely what makes “Westernization” a seemingly useful analytic tool. When Da-song, a Taiwanese bridal photographer, studies visual images created in New York to guide and inspire his work, something like Westernization is happening. Yet to stop at this label is to miss what is going on. The images he studies are not merely Western; they have been produced by individuals with particular training and particular life experiences who create their images in particular business and cultural contexts. Class, gender, race, and ethnicity greatly influence which photographers’ images get published in the major fashion magazines that traverse the earth and end up in the hands of Da-song. The magazines he studies certainly do not represent *my* worldview and aesthetic tastes. Nor are they all pub-

lished in the United States; a few are from Western European publishers.<sup>12</sup> The bulk of the photographs contained in them are advertisements for several dozen multinational cosmetic and fashion corporations. Da-song's search for ideas is not limited to international fashion magazines. He takes ideas for abstract backgrounds from music videos, finds inspiration for trendy color combinations on billboards, and borrows poses from movie posters. Da-song looks at these images through eyes produced in a Taiwanese cultural context and structured by his own life experiences. What he, and hundreds of Taipei bridal photographers like him, take away from glossy international fashion magazines is something we may call "the West" but in fact is far more particular and complex than this conceptualization allows. The West as embodied in the creative work of Da-song is the product of particular powerful business leaders and the photographers they commission to promote their names and sell their wares. Most importantly, the West here is also a product of the imagination—of many individual imaginations in concert constructing a transnational community that exists nowhere but is known virtually everywhere.<sup>13</sup> In his work, then, Da-song acts neither "as a freewheeling agent, authoring worlds from creative springs within" (Holland et al. 1998: 170), nor as a passive conduit for the dissemination of worlds authored by others in the West. In Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) words, the process is "dialogic." Photographers, drawing from all of the various "languages" or worlds they have encountered, assemble or "orchestrate" a set of ideas about how modern Taiwanese couples ought to look.

Of course, not all of the various visual languages known to bridal photographers carry equal weight. In the art of competitive consumption, consumers emulate their perceived superiors in the effort to climb status hierarchies. Transnational media flows alter consumers' reference groups such that we—whether in Denver or Taipei—compare ourselves and our acquisitions to far-flung people, many of whom are fictional characters whose lives we watch unfold on television (see Scor 1998). Keeping up with the Joneses, or in Taiwan's case, keeping up with the Wangs, takes on global dimensions. In the globalizing community that is thus imagined, the emulation of "superiors" crosses nations, leaps continents. While Taipei bridal photographers like Da-song look to the United States and Western Europe for fashion trends, bridal photographers in the People's Republic of China look to Taiwan for images to emulate (cf. Yang 1997).

Da-song and his fellow bridal photographers are not the only ones looking at global mass media images, of course. Hui-zhu and many other

women in Taipei flip through the pages of magazines produced by transnational publishers, such as *Vogue*, *Bazaar*, *Elle*, and *Non-no* (Japan). Though these magazines are often published in Taiwan, the bulk of their pages, too, are filled with images promoting multinational fashion and cosmetic companies like Dolce and Gabbana and DKNY, Christian Dior and Clinique. Many women never look at more than the cover of fashion magazines, but they, too, see the images. Television commercials rely upon female faces and figures to promote everything from beer to automobiles. Advertising images saturate the urban landscape of Taipei—images of female bodies decorate billboards, bus placards, calendars, and cigarette lighters.

One cannot navigate Taipei's streets without absorbing dozens of images of Woman each day. I capitalize the word "Woman" because cosmetics and fashion industry images (not to mention the kinds of erotic photographs popular on calendars and cigarette lighters) tend to picture women not as real individuals in possession of subjectivities but as abstract, essential Woman (Goffman 1979). With sadly few exceptions, the images partake of visual codes and conventions popularized by multinational corporations and their advertising directors (though with much deeper historical roots in European painting), regardless of where they are produced. John Berger's (1972) famous observation that "men act, women appear" is borne out every day in the constructed images of advertisers. Scholars of consumer cultures in the United States and Great Britain have extensively documented the peculiar gendering of consumption wherein Woman is constructed as an object of consumption, a site for the work of commodities (namely beauty products), and the consumer-agent (Lury 1996).<sup>14</sup> Many who believe that mass media images of Woman have harmful, even fatal, influence on actual women who struggle (and usually fail) to measure up to media norms cite eating disorders and the demand for cosmetic surgery as products of Woman in the media. Will globalization amount to the transnational promulgation of particular practices in U.S. beauty culture that feminist scholars and activists identify as dangerous? If women the world over take up wearing high-heeled shoes, we can expect women the world over to experience the foot, knee, and hip problems that often require surgical repair later in American women's lives. The globalization of beauty is an important concern that merits empirical study. Just because images of skinny, high-heel-clad, makeup-doused women now enjoy transnational circulation does not mean that people everywhere will respond to these images in similar ways. Do women in Taipei find transnational mass media images

of Woman foreign, irrelevant to everyday modes of femininity because the Woman in transnational advertising usually has facial features, body shapes, and hair unlike those of any woman they know personally? Or do they, too, try to achieve mass media standards of beauty, even where mass media images frequently picture Woman as white?

If Argentines, Indonesians, and Pakistanis attribute different meanings than Americans might to the plot lines of *Bay Watch* and *Lethal Weapon*, what of the visual codes of these and other transnationally circulating visual texts in which women are pictured as visual spectacles—conveying “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 1989)—rather than as agentive subjects? Previous work by anthropologists and cultural studies scholars indicates that it is a safe bet that people around the world will come to very different readings of any one episode of *Bay Watch*. But the reception of its underlying visual codes, shared with so many other media images of Woman, is more difficult to study. If one takes seriously Stuart Ewen’s (1988) claim that visual texts have overtaken written ones as the most important form of education about the world, the question of what happens when visual images travel is of critical and pressing importance (see also Lutz and Collins 1993; Schein 1994).

Taiwanese bridal photographs are homegrown responses to life in the media-inundated environment where transnationally circulated images of Woman prevail. This ethnography studies how women in one global city, Taipei, engage globalization by transforming themselves into Woman and deploying the resulting images. Taiwanese bridal photography replicates objectifying, mass media constructions of femininity in its beauty practices and visual codes but then puts its simulations of Western Woman (herself always already a simulation) to new uses. By making the visual imagery itself into a consumer good necessary to a proper wedding, the bridal industry provides recently married women—who, in de Lauretis’s (1984) terms, know themselves to be historical subjects with their own desires and sources of agency—with their very own representations of themselves as mass-mediated, objectified Woman.

#### AUTHENTICITY AND CONSUMERISM

Though I have long been convinced of the importance of Taiwanese bridal photography as a case study in gender and globalization, people I met in Taipei often told me I was studying the wrong thing. “Study ‘traditional’ weddings,” they told me. “Go to the countryside.” But rural

couples, too, wear Western styles, so one informant suggested that I go to the television film studios to see a *real* traditional wedding being filmed for a soap opera. Some had a hard time understanding why I would study this topic because they perceived their photographs to be exactly like those kept in American homes. Making lavish bridal photographs and displaying them are understood as acts that unify members of a global, cosmopolitan culture. One informant's husband even questioned whether Yale University would confer a degree on a student whose thesis concerned such a trivial topic. Though these reactions may sound discouraging, I found them greatly encouraging. I hope that this book will help readers, in the United States, Taiwan, and elsewhere, to denaturalize and question cultural beliefs and practices about gender and beauty that, too often, go unexamined.<sup>15</sup>

Many readers might, at first, agree with the people in Taipei who said that an anthropologist ought to go to the countryside to seek out the most traditional wedding practices, not set up her study in the heart of a global city and focus on the production and consumption of a consumer product. They assume that consumer commodities and consumer society are dull and devoid of meaning, that consumption individualizes and atomizes people, that consumption destroys culture (see Jameson 2000: 57). In short, the anthropologist should seek out that which is old because modern consumption—even and especially conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1925)—is vapid. A parallel assumption is that cultural practices outside consumer society, such as traditional wedding ceremonies, contain cultural meaning and social value beyond mere status competition. Daniel Miller (1995b) argues that this very logic stunted the development of the anthropology of material culture, which tended to avoid the study of consumption. The discipline, he argues, became mired in moralizing distinctions between gifts and commodities that took the commodity form as inauthentic (empty of meaning, devoid of social value) and the gift form as authentic (loaded with meaning, full of social value). A central tenet of the present study is that bridal photographs in Taiwan defy the commodity/gift binary. They are very much “beyond commerce” (Douglas and Isherwood 1979)—they are rich with cultural meanings and textured by social relationships even as they are bought and sold on the consumer marketplace.

Taiwanese bridal photographs are unique in the world of commodities in that consumers directly participate in their production. The bridal photography production process of dress selection, makeovers, and

photo sessions has become a consumable in and of itself. The process is today as much a part of wedding rituals as are customary family wedding rites. As such, they are gender rituals and rites of passage as central to modern life in Taiwan as are the temple and ancestral rites more conventional to its anthropological literature. Though these rites are performed in the service of commodity production, they do not lack meaning.

Despite their willful excesses and joyful artifice in representation, Taiwanese bridal portraits possess a kind of authenticity and originality that the mass-media visual forms they emulate lack. Walter Benjamin (1985) argues that, in mechanical reproduction, art is simultaneously democratized by widespread dissemination of artwork and desacralized by the ripping of the art object from its social context. Benjamin contends that, prior to mechanical reproduction, art objects often have “cult value” and, due to their deep embeddedness in particular social contexts, possess an “aura” that is lost when they are mechanically reproduced and thereby decontextualized from their social setting. The decontextualization of the person by the mechanical/chemical processes of photographic portraiture produces objects similarly lacking in aura and authenticity. This is certainly the case in, for example, advertising photography. In Taipei’s bridal salons, bridal images constructed by the photographer in the studio have little relationship to real-life experiences. In this regard, Taiwanese bridal photographs suffer a profound lack of authenticity. Benjamin would add that the nature of photography is to refuse the very notion of authentic artworks. Photographic negatives give us the possibility of creating countless prints, none more original or authentic than any other. By destabilizing the relationship between authenticity and art, photography seizes art from elite hands, delivering it to the masses and creating space for critical consciousness.

Of consumerist society, David Harvey argues that “the greater the ephemerality, the more pressing the need to discover or manufacture some kind of eternal truth that might lie therein.” Looking for authenticity, people turn to photographs and other items tied to memories to generate “a sense of self that lies outside the sensory overloading of consumerist culture and fashion . . . [and] the ravages of time-space compression” (1989: 292). Brides anticipate that in time all will forget that she never looked as beautiful as her bridal photographs render her, never had real-life claims to the opulent riches implied in the portraits. The photos’ lack of authenticity is not a problem; in fact, that is their very appeal. Moreover, bridal salons sell not only the photographs but also the “once in a lifetime” experience of making them, where brides are

treated as celebrities, the princesses of late capitalism. Though lacking in authenticity, the photos are full of authentic social value and meaning.

The social value invested in bridal portraits is made clear by their treatment relative to other commodities. Martyn Lee (1993) notes the turn away from consumer durables toward disposables (short-term or holiday-use goods) and the miniaturization of many commodities in order to make room for more goods in living spaces overcrowded with stuff. The willingness of people in Taiwan to accommodate the enormous size and weight of bridal albums in the face of the miniaturization of other possessions is striking. So, too, is their willingness to leave the bridal portrait hanging above their beds for many years, even as they grow tired of other home furnishings and replace them with new colors, updated styles.<sup>16</sup>

Though the bridal photography production process involves many elements of mass production, bridal portraits are nevertheless considered singular and original commodities. The framed wall hanging and the bridal album are rare, one-of-a-kind objects for the women and men they picture, even though a quick glance at the photos of a dozen couples reveals how formulaic they are. In important ways, bridal photographs differ from the vast majority of consumer objects in that they are not, in Karl Marx's language, alienated goods. The labor of photographers, assistants, and stylists in the production of bridal images is, of course, alienated, in that they produce the objects for "exchange value" and their labor generates profit for the salon owner. But brides and grooms, too, take part in the production of their photographs, and their labor is not alienated because they produce the photographs for their own use.

Because the photographs are made in advance of weddings so that they can be displayed publicly at wedding banquets, putting down a deposit on a bridal package is often a couple's first public act declaring their intentions to marry in the near future. Bridal salons sometimes dramatize this point; at bridal fairs, staff may applaud and launch firecrackers, shouting out congratulations to the couple who has made a purchase—just as future wedding banquet guests will applaud, launch firecrackers, and shout out congratulations when the newly married couple enters the banquet. In her makeover, the bride undergoes a ritual of transformation that separates her from her former status as a single young woman and changes her into a disguised and immobilized bride for her rite of passage into wifedom. In the photo shoot, the groom performs a ritual of romance where he makes a to-be-publicized expression of adoration for his bride. The photographs picture only the highly

constructed, commodified marriage rites of the bridal salon that are far removed from the lived social realities of familial obligations and family ritual. Nonetheless, they serve to memorialize those modern, consumerist-oriented rites of passage, which may often be more meaningful and exciting for young people than are their family wedding ceremonies. Wedding ceremonies are planned and orchestrated by the older generations, reflecting the old view of marriage as the exchange of the bride between two families. Young people prefer the way the bridal industry sees their relationships, in individualistic, romantic terms rather than as part of the familial obligation to reproduce. Bridal salons are often the only place where the view on marriage that young people prefer is enacted. Though the images delight in artifice and eschew the very notion of authentic representation of experience, they are authentically meaningful anyway because producing them is, itself, a lived experience that is often fraught with meaning for the bride.

Taiwanese bridal photography is contradiction-bound. Photographs that mimic aura-less, rootless transnational mass media images and homogenize individual, unique women into the generic Beautiful Bride are nonetheless original, one-of-a-kind cult objects that exude a sacred aura. The photographs stand as rare examples of the products of unalienated labor even as they simulate the visual codes of transnationally circulating mass media forms that conflate Woman with Commodity and, many believe, alienate real women from their real bodies in the United States today, where self-starvation and cosmetic surgery are lauded practices in some social groups. The enormous photographs at first look like testaments to individuality but, as this ethnography demonstrates, what makes a bridal album successful is the photographer's ability to portray the bride in multiple, constructed personae, as different from one another as possible.

Taiwanese bridal photographs are at once profoundly full of and devoid of meaning. They are full of meaning because they ritualize the transformation of women and men into wives and husbands. They are full of meaning in that people in Taipei today deploy them as status markers and because they mark changing gender relations and changing definitions and evaluations of femininity in intergenerational family conflicts. They are devoid of meaning in that people viewing them take for granted that the images are *not* representations of lived social realities. Like advertising and other mass media images, they carry no promise of substance. They are surfaces only, utterly detached from substance, moral character, and material social relations. In their miming of the

West, the bridal photographs reflect the profound emptiness that I think people in Taiwan often see in the transnational imagery that is, quite often, all that they know about the people of that imagined place. The bridal photographs are superficial, then, precisely because the West that they imitate is superficial, too.