

# Japanese-Style Bridal Services Popular

## – A Growing Services Industry in China –



By Shimazaki Masahiko

### Watabe Wedding's Operations in China

Watabe Wedding Corporation is a wedding arrangement firm that began in 1953 as a rental clothing store. In 1973, the company started diversifying its operations and pioneered a new business field of organizing wedding ceremonies overseas. Our company thinks of the bridal business as a solutions business and offers comprehensive consultation services, helping couples choose the venue of their ceremony, whether in Japan or abroad, and advising them on wedding attire, parties and honeymoons. Our operations in China started in 1993 when we set up a 100%-owned factory in the suburbs of Shanghai to manufacture wedding dresses. We opened Watabe Wedding's Shanghai branch in 1997, and started offering bridal services. In November 2004, we opened as a follow-up to the Shanghai branch a comprehensive bridal shop "weisi" located at the five-star luxury hotel Okura Garden Hotel Shanghai, offering services for arranging wedding ceremonies for the first time in China. We are happy to report that the shop is steadily gaining popularity among China's well-to-do.

### Making Most of Our Strengths

Weddings in the socialist country are obviously different from those in Japan. In 1997, when we opened our bridal shop in Shanghai, the norm was for the bride to wear the traditional Chinese dress "qipao" or a Western-style red wedding dress. White wedding dresses were rare as white is normally worn for funerals in China. The concept of wedding photographs in China is also different from that in Japan. Such photos are regarded in Japan as a memento of the wedding day - a lasting image of the spe-

cial occasion. In China, the couple's photo is taken before the wedding day, with the idea being to dress up, have a makeover and look one's best.

We found that in China, whenever we released a new product, other companies very often started selling similar products a few days later. Taiwanese and Hong Kong companies were particularly speedy in following suit, and would try to take away our customers through lower prices and adept sales talk. As for personnel, since the wedding photography business is very small in China, many photographers in the business already have previous experience working for other wedding arrangement companies. Because photographers continue to have personal contact with staff of their former employers, it is quite common for information about rival companies such as their daily sales to be relayed to competitors. In addition, the number of photographic developers and album makers is very limited, and so the products are often identical, leading to cutthroat competition. As a result, we faced a very tough business climate until we came up with our original in-house products.

To set ourselves apart from our rivals, we drew up a strategy to offer the latest Japanese dress designs, making the most of wedding dresses we were manufacturing in Shanghai for the Japanese market, to beat our rivals. Moreover, we built a factory in Shanghai in 2003 to make photo albums for the Japanese market, including photo development and editing, and we utilized the know-how of these operations to sell wedding photo albums in Shanghai for local customers.

As for wedding photo sessions, we adopted a style featuring a combination of the Japanese, Chinese and Taiwanese customs of photo taking. We made effective use of hotels and outdoor gardens rather than sticking to photo stu-

dios. In Japan, natural-looking makeup for weddings had already become popular, but in Shanghai, makeup was heavy, like stage makeup. To change this, we brought a beauty specialist from our Hawaii branch to show staff how to apply makeup that looks natural. Also, as the concept of hygiene was not yet fully widespread, we provided training for our staff and improved the basic steps in applying makeup. For example, instead of using the same powder puff on different customers, we made sure that once a powder puff had been used, it was disinfected and washed before being used for the next customer.

### Understanding What "Service" Is All About

In the services industry, the way an individual carries out his or her duties is a crucial factor in determining the quality of service a company offers. This is a strict reality. In China, however, national traits, the sense of value and culture all differ greatly from those in Japan, and it took a large amount of effort to change the mentality - way of thinking - of our staff. We went to great pains to reach the point where our staff understood the philosophy and policy of our company and was able to provide products and services of good quality. We chose our staff through interviews and began their training by first sending them to Japanese hotels. For the duration of a week, they were given tasks such as cleaning the lobbies and were taught the basics of the hospitality industry. The staff members we sent were a chosen few - out of around 100 people, only 12 had passed the interviews - and yet their behavior triggered complaints of bad manners from the hotels that took them in for training. We spent countless hours in teaching

Photo: Watabe Wedding Co.

our staff the basic vocabulary to use for customers and improving the way they attended to them. After the first phase of basic training, we went on to train the staff in the various specialized fields.

### Motivating Chinese Staff

In order to heighten the motivation of our Chinese staff and to maintain the quality of our services, it was necessary for us to numerically grade each part of our operations and to link the assessment with each individual's performance. Every day, managers announce the results of merit rating on the performance of each employee, encouraging or reprimanding the staff as necessary. Such a daily procedure of appraisal is necessary because in China, the prospect of having a good performance rewarded by a bonus salary six months ahead is not an incentive for workers. Six months are too long for the Chinese to wait, and even the bonus salary is often not enough to persuade workers to stay with a company. Clearly, the personalities of the Chinese are different, and unlike in Japanese society, words alone are not sufficient to motivate workers. Every time there is a problem involving the behavior of staff toward customers, groups are reorganized and the numerical grading system has to be changed accordingly. The managers are thus called upon to be mindful of details, to keep an eye on both staff and customers, and to take appropriate responses. We believe that continuing it is the only way to earn a good reputation from among customers.

### Economic Growth Changing Wedding Style

In line with economic growth, fashion trends in Shanghai have changed notably since 2003, and women walking on the streets could easily be mistaken for women in Tokyo. Naturally, the style of wedding ceremonies has also changed. In the past, wedding photos were regarded as proof of matrimony, and a substitute for the wedding ceremony itself. In the Chinese wedding photography business, the conventional thinking used to be that photography studios had to be on the streets, and that it was impossible for wedding photo



Japanese-style wedding has found its way into rich Chinese people in urban areas, producing a new breed of bridal culture in China.

shops in hotels to be successful. Now, however, even the order of procedures has changed, with an increasing trend seen for couples to first reserve a party room in the hotel and then to hold a photo-taking session. The recent trend in Shanghai appears similar to one in Japan during its economic boom when hotel wedding ceremonies were at their height. As a result, we have been able to attract high-end customers, supported by the original products we are able to manufacture ourselves.

In Shanghai, the average price of a wedding photo package is around 3,000 yuan. At our comprehensive bridal shop "Weisi" located at the five-star luxury hotel Okura Garden Hotel Shanghai, the price of a wedding photo package is 7,000 to 10,000 yuan, more than three times the average price. Our prices are the highest, but we have been able to maintain them. By offering wedding services that combine elements of both Japanese and Chinese wedding cultures, it is apparent that we have started to bring about a change in the Shanghai wedding business.

### Blending in the Japanese Style

We succeeded in Shanghai because we set up a scheme to directly link production and services and the needs of customers to offer totally different products

from those of our competitors. We have prevailed in China as the only wedding arrangement firm that provides comprehensive services because we have a manufacturing base as our major backbone, and we have been able to expand from that to provide various services. Also, as an independent company, we started from scratch to build up a framework based on "people, products, money and information," which are the resources of business, and struck the right balance in providing appropriate products and services.

With the Beijing Olympics set for 2008 and the Shanghai World Exposition for 2010, the Chinese economic growth will likely accelerate. As the bridal business becomes larger, the wedding culture is likely to change and evolve. We expect to push ahead with our bridal business in Shanghai aggressively as an important part of our company's business strategy. We hope to continue creating and proposing a lifestyle symbolizing a new, inspiring type of Chinese wedding that merges Chinese tradition and Japanese wedding culture.

J.S

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