



A TIME FOR RENEWAL

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Couples will travel to exotic locations and pay up to US\$250,000 for their pre-wedding shoots. Photos: Handouts

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A documentary feature by Australian Olivia Martin-McGuire explores the mainland's flamboyant pre-wedding photo shoot phenomenon and the Chinese concept of love

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When she visited the mainland for the first time in 2004, Australian-born photographer turned director Olivia Martin-McGuire fell in love with its "pioneering spirit and upbeat pace".

A decade later she found herself living in Shanghai with her husband and children. Over the course of four years in the city, Martin-McGuire became fascinated by love and romance in Chinese society – in particular the phenomenon of the lavish pre-wedding photos.

"I started noticing couples on every street being photographed in flamboyant wedding costumes. Delving deeper, I discovered this offered a curious window into understanding China," Martin-McGuire, who is now based in Hong Kong, says. "It got me thinking... what is love in China? What is the dream, what is the fantasy?"

Her fascination grew as she captured these scenes with her camera. Her first photo series was published in a magazine in 2016. She then decided to take her interest to another level and make a documentary.

China Love was released last year. It was a documentary prize finalist at the Sydney Film Festival, where it premiered in June, and screened nationwide in Australia this month.



The film is a portrait of love in modern China, illustrating how the costly and theatrical nature of pre-wedding photo shoots has become a big part of the dream wedding. But through its stories, it also reflects how the tradition of wedlock is changing rapidly as China develops, and the tensions that can arise between younger,

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OLIVIA MARTIN-MCGUIRE

freedom-loving Chinese and their more conservative parents. "The film follows five different storylines, and also questions why these pre-wedding photos are so important in Chinese modern culture," Martin-McGuire says.

The phenomenon has become big business. She cites figures from the China Wedding Industry Development Report that estimates US\$80 billion was spent on weddings in 2015, up from US\$57 billion four years earlier. Couples typically spent between 20 per cent and 25 per cent of their nuptials budget on photo shoots, the report says.

The cultural significance of the pre-wedding shoot is highlighted in the story of Chinese bride-to-be Jenny and her fiancé David, a white Australian banker.

"They are a very fun couple," Martin-McGuire narrates in the film. "He's a very down-to-earth Australian and she's from Uruguay." The couple are filmed zooming through the streets of Shanghai on a motorbike, before stopping at a corner.

"I want to have wedding photos taken underwater," says Jenny. "You know, and then we can..."

"I won't do that," David interrupts. "Later, we see that David has relented, and the couple are having their photos taken underwater, wearing white wedding attire and holding up a sign bearing the word "love" in red letters.

"He doesn't really understand the idea of the pre-wedding photos at all, and doesn't want to do something that seems so unnatural to him, and unrealistic," Martin-McGuire says.

"But he ends up coming around to the idea because he realises it is so important to Jenny, as it is to every Chinese person."

The director puts his resistance down to how Australian culture expects men to behave manly. "David really struggled with the idea because he found it embarrassing, whereas I think

that Chinese men are much more willing to follow the woman's dream. In fact, it goes much further than that. It's a tradition which is really important to both Chinese men and women, and to their parents and grandparents.

"Every couple marrying in China will take part in a pre-wedding shoot up to one year before the actual ceremony," Martin-McGuire says.

"The day involves several costume and backdrop changes, where you can become a character in any fantasy you choose. In more exotic locations, couples will pay up to US\$250,000 for the shoot."

Martin-McGuire says the images are not only intended to be a record of the marriage, but, more importantly, proof of love, romance, freedom and financial resources.

"It's a new world," Jenny says in the voice-over, as she is shown after a change of garments – descending into the water again, in a magnificent flowing red chignon dress and in the arms of her fiancé. They are filmed floating dreamily around coral reefs."

Love in China, Martin-McGuire says, is such a feel-good experience for everyone – a social panacea – and the pre-wedding glitz is aimed at putting that love in show to make friends and relatives feel happy.

"It's not just an individual thing about what you want in love, but it's also about a strong love for your family and your community, and what's right for everyone," she says.

A businessman who has had a huge impact on the industry also makes an appearance in the documentary. Jiahao Group founder Allen Shi, known as the godfather of the wedding photo industry, has factory-style studios in 30 mainland cities – offering mock sets and Photoshopped backdrops – and a presence in seven locations around the world. "Every day we have 2,000 customers," the Shanghai native and self-made billionaire says. "It's not just a business; it's like a war."

The government has taken a dimmer view. In December, Beijing poured cold water on the spectacular photo shoots, calling for an end to such "vulgar" new wedding traditions.

But the lavish shoots are not



A scene from the documentary *China Love*.

long, then suddenly they find freedom to pursue these things. Nobody could even have dreamed about it 30 years ago," says one young woman present at the ceremony, as the elderly couple wipe tears from their eyes.

"To photograph yourself, to do proper wedding photos [decades] later... it shows older family members lived through hell. Look how far we have come," a male onlooker adds.

For Martin-McGuire, there is a sense of the whole country, young and old, spinning new dreams and memories through the fun, fantasy and dressing-up rites of pre-wedding photography.

A kind of collective healing is taking place in these photos, she says. A healing of the wounds inflicted during the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, when anyone who sought to beautify themselves, or stand out from the crowd, would be humiliated.

These wounds still linger for some. The documentary evokes drama between couples who find themselves torn between new and old traditions. Emotions ride high when faced with a passport photo. As many as five couples could be grouped together for the occasion, Martin-McGuire says.

"Couples were matched for the practicalities of social responsibility, for their families, and ultimately for their country. Wedding photos existed solely as proof of the marriage," Martin-McGuire says.

"She wants the freedom to be able to do it her way," the filmmaker says, referring to Wiona, who spent six years studying in Australia, free from conservative Chinese strictures.

The story of Li and Junbo, from Anhui, offers yet another perspective on the family dynamics of Chinese weddings. "Li's father was quite grief-stricken [at the thought of losing his daughter], so it offered us a far more real portrait of traditional weddings in China," Martin-McGuire says.

"Filming it also gave me the opportunity to get a look in at a more realistic side of love and weddings – couples who would not be spending heaps of money getting photos."

"Getting behind the scenes like this really got to see and learn about the warmth of family and community that exists in China," she says.

intended only to be ostentatious, Martin-McGuire says. They signify a couple's freedom in finding love.

Only a generation ago, the communist state forbade any such showy behaviour. Weddings were arranged by the state, army or family, and documented with a simple black-and-white portrait, with couples looking as though they were posing for a passport photo. As many as five couples could be grouped together for the occasion, Martin-McGuire says.

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ALLEN SHI, A SHANGHAI BILLIONAIRE KNOWN AS THE GODFATHER OF THE WEDDING PHOTO INDUSTRY

Nevertheless, *China Love* documents how some older couples who did find true love are making up for lost opportunities by getting in on the new trend.

In one intimate and poignant scene, friends and relatives attend the photo session and wedding ceremony of Peipei and Xuezhong, in their small suburban flat in Shanghai. "[They were] oppressed for so

