

RETAIL

How can brands target China's booming wedding industry?

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Bride Vivian Bao in her Pronovias dress purchased from Brides do Good. Image courtesy of Vivian Bao

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Worth more than **\$300 billion** at last count, the global wedding industry is big business for luxury brands.

Despite this, research by [The Urban Institute](#) has found that **millennials** in the United States are getting married in fewer numbers and later in life than previous generations, leading to fierce competition between brands and retailers targeting this shrinking market.

In China, however, the past five years has seen the wedding industry revenue grow at an exuberant rate, with this segment now worth more than \$130 billion. Given such potential, what can businesses do to get their slice of the wedding pie?

Style over price tag

For weddings in China, the big name designers continue to count, and the price seemingly does not.

"The price for Chinese buyers is not at all an issue" said Anna Martnez, cofounder of The Courtyard Consulting, an agency dedicated to the Chinese bridal sector.

"In fact, Chinese buyers almost always buy the most expensive dresses from our selection of brands to stock in their stores," she said. "On average, these dresses will cost between \$10,000-\$20,000 per gown."

Ms. Martnez explains that they have seen a huge increase in the numbers of Chinese buyers attending the famous Valmont Barcelona Bridal Fair, with last year 70 Chinese retailers making the trip (they were expecting almost double this coming April, but concerns surrounding **Covid-19** may affect this).

Ms. Martnez said that even for the most frugal of Chinese brides would expect to see a purchase of a minimum of three dresses, "one Chinese style with regional design, one big ball gown, and one simpler design used for the toast."

With such a huge market to take advantage of, it should be of no surprise that luxury brands and retailers are shifting their focus to Chinese consumers over their Western counterparts.

The Atelier Couture was officially established in 2013 when it opened its first wedding dress design studio in Shanghai.

In 2017, legendary designer **Jimmy Choo** joined as creative director and the brand made its debut at Shanghai Fashion Week. According to The Courtyard Consulting, it has since become one of the most popular brands in China, thanks to its modern style, traditional touch and ultimately, big name.

Sustainable sources

It is not only the sale of dresses that are contributing to this booming Chinese wedding market.

According to Ms. Martnez, they still see between 60 percent to 70 percent of Chinese brides **renting dresses** a concept that might seem unusual to Western consumers.

"The rental bridal dress market is huge business in China, one of the reasons being that brides will need between three to five dresses to wear on the big day," said Vivian Bao, a bride from Suzhou who was married last year.

"We also don't have the tradition of passing your dress onto the next generation, so brides really don't mind if the dress isn't brand new," she said.

The rental market in China has long since inadvertently promoted a sustainable business model, with this sector allowing for brides to afford multiple dresses.

Ms. Bao purchased one of her dresses from Brides do Good, a social enterprise that sells pre-loved and sample designer wedding gowns, from sought-after brands, with a portion of their sales funding charity projects protecting millions of vulnerable girls worldwide from child marriage.



Bride Vivian Bao and her partner at their wedding in China last year. Image courtesy of Vivian Bao

Company founder Chantal Khoueir explains that for Chinese brides, it is the label that matters, but also an increased concern by millennial brides for sustainability and authenticity, "Our Chinese customers are extremely designer conscious, and brides love the likes of Pronovias, Elie Saab, Reem Acra and Galia Lahav.

"The millennial generation of brides and grooms are looking to demonstrate their cultural heritage and social status through their wedding outfits. However, despite the designer name remaining the hook, we are seeing a conscious shift towards a more sustainable wedding dress."

Celebrity and social media endorsement

Ms. Bao also explains that these brands often gain a huge following in China after being seen at celebrity weddings.

"Celebrity endorsement is very powerful in China," Ms. Bao said. "For example, Gina Alice, let me show you a photo!"

Last summer saw superstar pianist Lang Lang's wife Gina wear Galia Lahav at their wedding in Paris, and since then Chinese brides have been desperate to replicate the design at their own weddings.

In 2015, Chinese icon **Angelababy** married actor **Huang Xiaoming** in a bespoke Dior dress, that supposedly took almost six months to make, in addition to two more couture gowns from designer Elie Saab. Her wedding was worth a reported \$31 million and sets an almost impossible standard for many affluent Chinese consumers hoping to follow in her footsteps.

Weddings are becoming the most prominent way for label-loving millennials to showcase their status, and businesses and brands are starting to realize the market's potential.

Another huge moneymaker of the **Chinese wedding** industry is pre-wedding photo shoots, used to showcase status and wealth on social media. European photo shoots specifically for Chinese couples can last between one and three days and cost anywhere between \$2,500 and \$15,500.

According to Marie Tulloch, senior client services manager of Chinese marketing consultancy Emerging Communications, "Weddings are the single biggest showcase available for Chinese couples to demonstrate wealth, taste, sophistication and background, and therefore very large amounts of research go into what become major productions. Often no expense is spared financially and or in time to ensure all elements are absolutely right."

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