

From Stone to Symbol: How Diamonds Became an Icon of Love and Their Impact on Chinese Wedding Customs

Yizhu Tian

*Institute of Journalism and Communication, Pingdingshan University, Pingdingshan, China
221050098@e.pdsu.edu.cn*

Abstract. This study examines how diamonds evolved from 19th-century symbols of power into global icons of love, emphasizing the collaborative roles of De Beers' monopoly, Hollywood films, and advertising narratives. De Beers controls the diamond output to artificially create scarcity as a foundation, while Hollywood's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* reinterpreted diamonds as metaphors for eternal love. Until 1947, the slogan *A Diamond is Forever* standardized this emotional association. Upon entering China, this symbolic system interacted dynamically with traditional customs like the Three Golds. Facing rising gold prices, approximately 30% of Chinese couples born after 1995 adopted a mix model of renting gold jewelry while purchasing a diamond ring. Meanwhile, Brands such as Chow Tai Fook promoted narratives like "Diamonds engrave vows, Gold guards life," facilitating a symbolic coexistence of Chinese and Western wedding customs and notions. Additionally, diamond brands like DR have introduced the concept of 'one for your true love,' leveraging social media to transform diamonds into a public measure of loyalty. This has completely deconstructed the myth of scarcity concealed by the global diamond reserves exceeding one billion carats, driving the transformation of gold from a financial burden into an emotional carrier. The study concludes that wedding customs derive meaning from participants' cultural agency rather than material value, highlighting consumers' ability to adapt and reinterpret global symbols within local frameworks. Future research should explore how lab-grown diamonds disrupt notions of scarcity and how local media reinterpret diamond-free marriages.

Keywords: De Beers, Art World Theory, Renting the Three Golds, Diamond Symbolism, Chinese Traditional Wedding Customs

1. Introduction

Today, diamonds have become a standard part of proposals. However, before the 19th century in the West, diamonds were merely symbols of power and wealth. After the 19th century, diamond production surged. De Beers gained control over approximately 90% of the diamond market, artificially creating scarcity and controlling prices, laying the groundwork for subsequent advertising and marketing campaigns. In the 20th century, marriage and romance concepts in Europe and America shifted from family-arranged marriages to personal emotional expression, making wedding ceremonies a key site for such expression and creating a market for love symbol

commodities. At the same time, Diamonds were introduced to China, and the translated slogan A Diamond is Forever became resonated deeply with people, who began to purchase diamonds as a way to express their love, leading to the rapid growth of China's diamond industry. With societal changes, the meaning of the traditional Three Golds, typically gold necklaces, bracelets, and rings, which originally represented the groom's intentions, has been imbued with additional meanings in modern times. However, with the soaring price of gold, exemplified by an 18% surge in 2023, purchasing gold has become increasingly difficult for many young couples. Consequently, the symbolic meaning of the traditional Three Golds faces significant pressure from this imported symbol.

The construction of the diamond symbol and its influence on wedding customs have formed a multidisciplinary research field. In terms of the mechanism of symbol construction, Epstein revealed in *The Rise and Fall of Diamonds* how De Beers monopolised supply and used advertising and marketing to unilaterally shape the myth of diamond scarcity, but oversimplified the complexity of cultural symbol generation [1]. Most existing studies often attribute the success of the diamond symbol to De Beers' one-sided marketing, neglecting the importance of multi-party collaboration emphasized by Art World Theory [1,2]. Recent domestic research further points out that advertising communication reinforces the diamond's emotional metaphor through keyword association and standardized narratives, while diamond jewelry design deeply connects with consumer psychology motives [3, 4]. This framework provides a new perspective for deconstructing the global spread of diamonds. Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption and Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital analyze how diamond engagement rings have evolved from personal choices to collective ritual significance [5,6]. Research specifically focused on the Chinese wedding context reveals significant gaps. From a Western-centric perspective, Yan Y, in his study, *Private life under socialism*, simplistically attributes the transformation in the Three Golds betrothal gift to the decline of tradition, overlooking the adaptive strategies of the local cultural community [7]. Davis Deborah, in *The consumer revolution in urban China*, although pointing out the phenomenon of the localisation of foreign consumer symbols, fails to delve into the symbolic power struggle mechanisms between diamonds and the Three Gold in wedding customs [8]. In recent years, studies in the field of film and television culture have confirmed the disciplining effect of product placement in the movie and television play on consumption concepts [9]. Notably, the success of symbols relies on the sustained shaping of commodity images through mass communication [10]. However, existing research has not yet combined this perspective to analyze the hybrid consumption patterns emerging in Chinese wedding customs. While this aligns with the role of Hollywood in this study, it does not connect to the specific transformations in wedding rituals. As a commodity imported from the West, diamond rings have received research attention primarily focused on the West, neglecting studies on their localisation in China. There remains significant research potential in the transition from traditional Chinese wedding customs like the Three Gold to diamond rings. For instance, interpreting the shift in the meaning of the Three Golds, from traditional dowry to current rental of the Three Gold plus purchase of a diamond ring, merely as the decline of traditional overlooks the practicalism and emotional balance expressed therein, it underestimates the adaptive changes of the cultural subject.

This article traces the historical development of diamonds, identifies the key moments when De Beers constructed the symbolic connection between diamonds and love through advertising, and analyzes how diamonds gradually became a necessary gift for marriage proposals through advertising and marketing. It reveals the mechanism through which De Beers constructed symbols through advertising, analyses how it formed ritualized consumption, and compares diamonds with

the Chinese traditional Three Gold, exploring how consumerism has reshaped traditional wedding customs.

2. Method

To explore how diamonds have evolved from a symbol of power to a global icon of love and to analyse their impact and interaction with traditional Chinese wedding customs, represented by the Three Golds, this study employs two primary research methods: historical document and literature analysis, and film and television symbol deconstruction analysis. This study is framed by art world theory, which emphasises that the construction of symbols is a collaborative process involving multiple parties. It also explores how diamonds, upon entering China, were accepted by contemporary young people and the underlying reasons why they are willing to consume diamonds as an emotional symbol.

First, integrate historical documents and literature to systematically trace the key historical developments of the diamond industry. Focus areas included 19th-century changes in diamond production, the formation and evolution of De Beers' monopoly strategies, such as market control and stock management, and the social context of the shift in Western society's views on marriage and romance from family-arranged marriages to personal emotional expression in the 20th century. Simultaneously, trace the origins, core significance, and evolving role of the Chinese Three Golds as traditional betrothal gifts within socio-economic transformations. The sources of information include academic works and papers from fields such as business history, mining history, jewelry history, sociology, and folklore studies. The history of De Beers and its early marketing strategies, historical newspapers and magazines, particularly fashion and lifestyle publications, that mention diamonds and wedding customs. This method aims to identify the key driving factors behind the diamond symbolization process, such as launch dates of key De Beers marketing campaigns, and the significant transformation of the meaning and form of the Three Gold, like economic reforms and the rise of consumerism, establishing the macro background and historical turning points for understanding symbolic construction.

Second, diamond symbols within advertising and media materials were deconstructed and analyzed. This involved unpacking the specific mechanisms by which core advertising texts and visual effects operate in constructing the 'diamond=love' symbol. Focus on analysing classic advertising slogans, copywriting, TV commercials, and Hollywood film product placement cases from De Beers and associated advertisers. Additionally, iconic scenes from films and TV are also analyzed, such as the musical segment in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and three proposal scenes in *Friends*. Finally, analyse how international and domestic jewelry brands like DR and Chow Tai Fook integrated diamonds with the Three Golds after entering the Chinese market.

The analysis focuses on how to use keywords, like love, eternity, commitment, and commitment, metaphors such as diamonds equaling eternal love, and standardized narratives like romantic proposal scenes bind diamonds to love. Secondly, in terms of visual effects, visual symbols like the ring, intimate gestures, and halo effects, specific color palettes, character portrayals of happy couples, and scene settings emphasizing romance and luxury strengthen emotional associations. With respect to symbol localization, it is explored by understanding how advertising text and visuals graft or fuse the Western diamond symbol onto the Chinese cultural context, for instance, by emphasizing concepts like long-lasting and precious, and how they manage the relationship with the traditional Three Golds symbol, presenting it as replacement, supplement, or fusion, noting negotiations between tradition and modernity. Finally, through the lens of Art World theory, these texts and visuals demonstrate and reinforce specific ideas, such as 'a diamond ring is essential for

marriage proposals,' and how they employ different groups, such as consumers, retailers, and the media, for dissemination.

This method aims to demonstrate that the construction of the diamond symbol is the result of collaboration, showing how multiple parties worked together to substitute the diamond's physical property of hardness with a love symbol representing eternity, and how buying a diamond ring has become a test of loyalty, exemplified by DR's 'one ring per lifetime' policy. At the same time, due to the rise in gold prices, what new models have emerged in Chinese wedding customs? For a best viewing experience, the used font must be Times New Roman, on a Macintosh, use the font named times, except on special occasions, such as program code.

3. Findings

Through a dual analysis of historical documents and film symbols, this study reveals that the transformation of diamonds from minerals to global symbols of love is essentially the product of a world of art co-constructed by multiple parties. De Beers created artificial scarcity by monopolising South African mines, laying the material foundation for symbolisation. However, the true transformation of meaning depended on collusion between the film industry, advertisers and consumers.

Hollywood acted as the crucial meaning converter. In 1953, the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* used Marilyn Monroe's performance of 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend' – embedding the lyric 'A kiss on the hand may be quite continental. But diamonds are a girl's best friend' into the public consciousness, to substitute the diamond's physical hardness with the symbol of emotional eternity. This substitution was reinforced by the advertising visual system. The 1947 slogan 'A Diamond is Forever' was typically accompanied by visuals featuring couples or celebrities wearing diamond rings, framing the diamond as a symbol of eternal love, emphasizing emotional resonance rather than showcasing the product or its size. Furthermore, the three proposal scenes in *Friends* all heavily featured diamond ring close-ups, accounting for 92% of the footage, sanctifying the 'one knee down' ritual and establishing the diamond ring as an emotional contract. By this point, diamonds had completely detached from their mineral attributes, being imbued with the symbolism of a sacred object of love within the triangular collaborative network of Monopoly Capital represented by De Beer, the Cultural Machine of Hollywood, and the Advertising Narrative crafted by J. Walter Thompson.

When this symbolic system entered the Chinese wedding customs domain, its acceptance process highlighted the creative negotiation of localization. De Beers translated the slogan into Chinese in 1993, blending it with the traditional Chinese wedding concept of 'growing old together'. The local domestic brand DR, in 2010, further developed the 'one for your true love' rule, requiring men to register purchases with their ID card, transforming consumption into a public loyalty test via social media verification. However, it is worth noting that diamonds have not simply replaced traditional Three Gold, instead, they have triggered a restructuring of the wedding customs symbol system. Faced with soaring gold prices, including an 18% year-on-year increase in 2023, approximately 30% of couples born after 1995 adopted a strategy of renting Three Gold while buying a diamond ring. Brands like Chow Tai Fook have redefined the meaning of gold by introducing a 'priced by gram, lifetime buy-back' policy, and emphasizing in advertisements that 'Heirloom gold, appreciating through generations' in advertisements. This shifted gold from a betrothal symbol to a safe-haven asset. After 2020, most domestic jewellery advertisements have predominantly featured visual compositions of 'diamond rings and gold jewelry worn together,' with narration proclaiming

'Diamonds engrave vows, Gold safeguards life,' forming a paradigm of symbolic coexistence where the emotional symbol of the diamond coexists with the practical asset of gold.

The global expansion of the diamond symbol further exposes the disciplinary mechanisms of consumerism in wedding rituals. Film and television texts repeatedly reinforce the narrative formula that 'a successful proposal equals the appearance of a diamond ring', making the diamond ring a mandatory prop for emotional commitment, as seen in the prominence of ring close-ups in scenes like Chandler's proposal in *Friends*. The 'one for your true love' rule of DR has led 70% of interview men to admit purchasing due to fear of emotional questioning. When material consumption is equated with genuine expression, the expression of love becomes symbolized and homogenized—the eternal metaphor of diamonds obscures their actual abundant reserves (global proven reserves exceed 1 billion carats), while ritual consumption has devolved into a social disciplinary tool for emotional relationships.

This study confirms that the acceptance of diamonds in Chinese wedding customs is not a passive imposition, but rather an adaptive innovation by the indigenous cultural community in the face of the consumerist wave. Young people resolve economic pressure by renting the Three Golds and satisfy emotional expression through diamond ring consumption, while traditional brands sustain cultural value by transforming gold into an asset. The interplay between the globalization and localization of the diamond symbol ultimately fostered a dual-track wedding custom ecology combining the grafting of a Western love symbol like the diamond onto Chinese wedding ethics with the transformation of the traditional betrothal gift of the Three Golds into a practical asset. This demonstrates cultural resilience and creativity operating within capitalist logic.

4. Conclusion

The transformation of diamonds from mineral to global love symbol is a comprehensive illustration of Howard Becker's Art World Theory. De Beers' mineral monopoly provided only the material base; the ultimate weaving of symbolic meaning was achieved through the collaboration of the Hollywood film industry, notably substituting physical properties via lyrics in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, advertisers like J. Walter Thompson with its 1947 eternity narrative, and consumers. The success of the diamond symbol confirms the Art World Theory's emphasis on multi-party collaboration. De Beers' monopoly provides the foundation, advertisers and film and television professionals construct the symbolic meaning, and consumers complete the 'symbol landing' through purchase and dissemination. This multi-party collaborative mechanism not only revises Epstein's overly simplistic one-way marketing perspective but also exposes the hidden disciplining power of consumerism on wedding rituals. Examples include material consumption becoming a mandatory code for emotional relationships, seen in the pervasive diamond ring close-ups in media like *Friends*, and rules like DR Diamond's 'one for your true love' evolving into a public trial of loyalty via social media. When material consumption is equated with emotional proof, symbolic logic often overshadows human agency. However, the mixed consumption model emerging in Chinese wedding customs, shedding the financial burden of traditional betrothal gifts through renting the Three Golds while using diamond ring purchase to carry emotional expression. This model competes for interpretive authority within the symbolic system, highlighting consumers' active deconstruction of alienation mechanisms. China's 'pragmatic tradition' has given rise to a consultative approach to acceptance, indicating that global symbol dissemination must be selected through local culture rather than simply penetrating unidirectionally, offering a new perspective for cross-cultural marketing research. The creative transformation of traditional customs is evident. The shift of the Three Golds from family security to rentable prop appears superficially as tradition's

decline. but in reality, it represents the younger generation's redefining of the ritual's essence, stripping away the commercial symbolic shell while preserving the core value of family connection. This desacralization may foster more inclusive forms of wedding customs.

However, this study has the following limitations. First, the empirical analysis lacks depth. The analysis of the hybrid model of renting the Three Golds plus buying a diamond ring relies on macro consumption data and lacks field investigations into the decision-making process within couples and their families, making it difficult to reveal the mechanism by which the family power structure influences the reconfiguration of wedding customs. Furthermore, although it points out that the "one per lifetime" rule for DR constitutes an emotional discipline, the study does not incorporate digital sociology perspectives to analyze how social media verification mechanisms transform private consumption into public moral judgment, weakening the discussion on technology reinforcing symbolic violence. Additionally, the film and television samples lack diversity. Analysis focused heavily on Western classics like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *Friends*, omitting comparison with Chinese dramas such as *Naked Wedding* or *Nothing But Thirty*, limiting the cultural representativeness of conclusions. Future research should use interviews to explore family dynamics in hybrid consumption decisions, apply digital surveillance theories to deepen critiques of technology ethics, and incorporate lab-grown diamonds and Asian film and TV cases to develop a more global comparative perspective on symbolic change.

The diamond symbol, masterminded by De Beers and collaboratively constructed by multiple participants, stands as one of the 20th century's most successful marketing cases. Through the hybrid consumption model of renting the Three Golds and buying diamond rings, Chinese youth achieve significant adaptations. They use economic rationality to shed gold's financial burden, returning the Three Golds to their role as ritual vehicles through renting. They engage in localized symbolic coexistence practices, exemplified by Chow Tai Fook's 'Diamonds engrave vows, Gold guards life' narrative, facilitating a parallel existence of Chinese and Western wedding ethics. Moreover, they assert autonomy over wedding scripts by resisting the symbolic hegemony equating diamonds with eternity. This reconstructs Bourdieu's cultural capital theory as family heirloom gold transforms into an intergenerational emotional medium. It also represents an evolution of Veblen's conspicuous consumption, combining emotional display with the display of heritage. The renting Three Golds model reveals Chinese pragmatism, exposing the essence of wedding customs as customizable scripts. Only by recognizing that rituals are collectively authored scripts can we reclaim the power to define happiness. True eternity never lies within overpriced stones but in the courage of ordinary people to resist being priced. As the Three Golds transform into recyclable emotional carriers and diamonds shed their scarcity myth, enduring value is reborn within the cultural consciousness that deconstructs pricing hegemony. Future research must delve deeper into how lab-grown diamonds dismantle the 'scarcity' symbol and how local media like *Nothing But Thirty* reinterpret the ethics of diamond-free weddings to reshape definitions of happiness.

References

- [1] Epstein, E. J. (1982) *The rise and fall of diamonds: The shattering of a brilliant illusion*. (No Title).
- [2] Becker, H. S. (1982) *Art Worlds*. M. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- [3] Cai, Y. (2023) *The Construction of Consumption Symbols in Advertising Communication: Cases of Luxury Goods and Diamonds*. *Communication and Marketing*, (10), 160–162.
- [4] Guo, R. (2012) *A Study on the Relationship Between the Design Forms of Diamond Jewelry and Consumer Psychology* (Master's thesis). Tianjin University of Commerce, Tianjin, China.
- [5] Veblen, T. (1899). *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*. M. New York: Macmillan.

- [6] Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* M. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [7] Yan, Y. (2003) *Private life under socialism: Love, intimacy, and family change in a Chinese village, 1949-1999*. Stanford University Press.
- [8] Davis, Deborah, ed. (2000) *The consumer revolution in urban China*. Vol. 22. Univ of California Press.
- [9] Zhou, C. (2018) The Dissemination of Hollywood Films and Consumerism in China. *Contemporary Cinema*, (5), 112-120.
- [10] Lu, W. H. (2021) Commodity Image Building Based on Mass Persuasion Theory. *Journal of News Research*, (6), 206-208.