



Above: For the past year, hundreds of wedding pictures from all around the country have been ground to dust at Liu Wei's plant in Langfang, Hebei Province.

Left: Most clients ask Liu to paint over their faces, mostly to neutralize the bad feelings of destroying pictures of living people.
— Photos / Ti Gong

Factory in Hebei does business wiping away all proofs of relationship gone sour

Lu Feiran

How long does it take to completely destroy a relationship? The answer is probably three minutes.

This is the duration of destroying wedding pictures at Liu Wei's factory. For the past 10 months, he has witnessed the end of hundreds of relationships. People sent the pictures to his plant and he threw them into grinders. The whole process is usually recorded on camera to be sent back to the clients.

The plant is in Langfang in Hebei Province, currently perhaps the only one of its kind in China. Liu said his friend had a plant providing destroying services for companies and asked him if he wanted to join. At first Liu planned to dispose of personal items, especially electronic products such as mobile hard drives, smartphones and memory cards, but the business didn't go as well as expected.

Early last year, a friend of Liu's divorced and asked him to help dispose of the wedding pictures. That struck Liu as a possible business opportunity. After he posted ads on social media, orders came faster than he realized.

"Nowadays wedding pictures are made of various materials, such as glass, acrylic or even crystals, so that it's difficult to destroy them without proper equipment," Liu told Shanghai

Daily. "Burning is not an option because burning photos of living people is often a taboo and dumping them in bins may cause privacy disclosure."

Most of Liu's clients are women and their reasons varied: Some marriages ended because of cheating; some because husbands passed away; some didn't divorce but wanted to take new photos as the old ones looked out of date.

"I feel that women have more 'sense of ritual' than men, and when marriage ends, they want more than men a ceremonial ending," Liu said.

The process of trashing is individualized. After receiving pictures, Liu will ask clients what they want to do before they are destroyed. Most clients want to cover faces with paint, black on women's and red on men's; some may have more radical requirements, such as painting a black cross on the groom's face.

Although Liu never brings up the topic of love life with his clients, he has still heard a lot of stories, especially from those who are hesitant to destroy pictures.

"Such clients would talk to you again and again and ask for your opinion, as if they want me to push them to make a final decision," he said. "But well, it's actually not my place to comment on that."

But such clients ask Liu to set up a

"period of regret" for each order, in case they change their mind. The measure seems to be necessary. One of Liu's clients sent him pictures because "wife ran away," but during the period of regret he asked for the pictures back because "wife's back."

Phew! That was close.

Destroying wedding photos is not the only divorce-related matter that has sparked discussion online. The other is ordering divorce photos.

A photographer from Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, whose screen name is Zhuganglie, published a set of pictures of him shooting divorce photos on social media. The pictures soon received wild concern as other of his works are wedding photos.

Zhuganglie followed the couple and took several pictures of them receiving their divorce certificates. The pictures showed a single mother with her young boy. The mother was just divorced, but there was no sorrow on her face. Her ex-husband was not in the picture.

"The significance of the picture is to record the real emotions of the moment, no matter if it's happy or sad," the photographer wrote. "No one says divorce must be unfortunate. Sometimes tying the knot could be the beginning of misfortune and parting with each other is the opposite."

He said that when the client made the order, he decided not to ask them to pose, so that he could record the most real moments. The biggest challenge was that during the shooting, he didn't know what could happen next, because the couple were not in a good mood.

The divorce "rituals" may come from China's rising divorce rate. According to the country's civil affairs authorities, it had been rising gradually since 2003. In 2019, it was 3.4 per thousand. After 2020, the rate maintained at about 2 per thousand.

Although people feel more unbiased, or even positive, about divorce, it doesn't mean that many would be willing to make the private moment a "social behavior."

Xu Peng, a therapist based in Shanghai, said that parting with partners, especially long-term ones, is a long process that doesn't complete in one "moment" or another. The process doesn't end with the destruction of wedding pictures or taking a set of divorce photos.

"From the perspective of psychological patterns, most people would like to keep the process to themselves," Xu told Shanghai Daily. "Because parting is often linked with pain, and this kind of pain is related to privacy and intimacy, therefore most people wouldn't choose to share the process with others."