

Research on the Evolution of Ancient Women's Wedding Attire

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ABSTRACT

Through the vast expanse of ancient China, a realm renowned for its ceremonial customs, the rites and attire of marriage ceremonies have traversed a protracted journey of inheritance and refinement since the Zhou dynasty, persisting through the epochs of Qin, Han, Sui, Tang, and Song, exemplifying an enduring reverence irrespective of societal strata. Addressing the perennial shifts in bridal attire across eras, this study leverages visual data from ancient women's wedding garments, employing methodologies of image interpretation, textual analysis, and design reconstruction to delineate their typologies, developmental patterns, and causal factors. The findings reveal: 1. Traditional Chinese bridal attire for women in antiquity can be broadly categorized into several forms, including plain robes with scarlet linings, intricately adorned ceremonial robes with hairpins, phoenix crowns paired with colorful veils, and embroidered dresses with red foundations. 2. The evolution of bridal attire styles across generations is intricately entwined with the ceremonial practices, structural ideologies, intellectual expressions, and social hierarchies prevalent in feudal societies, with pronounced correlations particularly during the Tang and Song periods. 3. The evolutionary changes in bridal attire primarily manifest in variations in garment structures, color palettes, designs, materials, and accessories. 4. The evolutionary trajectory of bridal attire encapsulates the crystallization of millennia-old Chinese cultural heritage, replete with profound cultural nuances and symbolic significances, concurrently serving as a guiding beacon for contemporary bridal attire development.

KEYWORDS

Ancient Bridal Attire; Evolutionary Trends; Costume Culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a nation known for its rituals and a kingdom of attire and headwear, China's civilization in clothing has a history spanning thousands of years. Ancient Chinese bridal attire serves as a carrier of the spirit of ceremony and culture. The evolution of wedding attire also reflects the development of costume culture to a certain extent. Since the Zhou dynasty, there has been a gradual establishment of clear marriage customs, with the attire system from the Shang dynasty being refined and inherited by the Zhou dynasty, forming the ancient Chinese "headwear and clothing" system and laying the foundation for ancient Chinese bridal attire. The Zhou dynasty emphasized dignified and solemn wedding attire, while the Han dynasty saw a trend towards luxurious development. The wedding attire system during the Wei and Jin dynasties was similar to that of the Qin and Han dynasties, reaching its peak during the Tang dynasty, reflecting the elevated status of women in that era[1]. The wedding attire of this period, in terms of style, fabric, color, and patterns, was the most diverse among all dynasties in Chinese history. However, starting from the Song dynasty, there was a shift towards a more restrained style in attire. By the Qing dynasty, influenced by Western aesthetic culture in clothing, there emerged wedding attire that blended Eastern and Western elements. There is a considerable amount of research

literature on traditional wedding attire design, exploring the changes in wedding attire across different periods and uncovering the cultural significance behind the elaborate evolution of bridal attire throughout history. However, contemporary understanding of traditional wedding attire remains somewhat limited. Hence, this article takes a chronological approach, focusing on images of women's wedding attire from various historical periods as the primary research object[2]. By examining the types and developmental changes of bridal attire, the article aims to explore the patterns of its evolution, hoping to contribute to a better understanding of traditional Chinese women's wedding attire for the general public.

2. WEDDING ATTIRE REGULATIONS DURING THE SHANG AND ZHOU DYNASTIES

The establishment of China's "headwear and clothing" system primarily reflected the social etiquette and political authority of the time. The attire was predominantly structured with an upper garment and lower garment. During the Zhou dynasty, weddings were referred to as "hun ceremonies," symbolizing the "ceremony at dusk." The proceedings were divided into six stages, commonly known as the "six rites." The color scheme of wedding attire generally followed the "xuan and xun system," with "xuan" representing black and "xun" signifying red. Due to the emphasis on solemnity and dignity during weddings, black was predominantly used, with red borders as accents. The groom's official wedding attire consisted of knee-length garments matching the color of the upper garment, a black waistband, and thick-soled red shoes. The bride's attire mirrored the groom's style, but her attire, including the knee-length garment, shoes, and waistband, were all black, symbolizing dedication. Thus, wedding attire during the Zhou dynasty exuded a sense of seriousness and solemnity. From the phrase "fu cheng che jia jing (jue) nai qu" ("the bride mounts the carriage, draped in thin silk, and then departs"), we can observe that before leaving her parental home, the bride would cover her head with a thin silk veil[3]. "Jing" refers to a single-layered silk garment worn outside the wedding attire to shield against dust and wind. This is somewhat similar to the concept of the later "red veil," serving as a precursor to the red veil in subsequent generations. The attire's structure can be seen in wedding costume stills from the TV drama "The Legend of Mi Yue" (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. TV drama "The Legend of Mi Yue" wedding attire stills

3. THE WEDDING ATTIRE SYSTEM DURING THE QIN AND HAN DYNASTIES

During the Qin and Han dynasties, the revival of wedding banquets and ceremonial music led to more luxurious wedding attire compared to the dark-colored ceremonial attire of the Zhou dynasty, as mentioned in the "Records of Rites - Great Mourning." Consequently, the standards of wedding ceremonies continued to rise, extending into the Tang dynasty, where even common folk weddings were extravagantly lavish. The prevalent attire consisted mainly of robes with connected large sleeves, embellished at the collar, sleeves, front, and hem with decorative borders to enhance aesthetics and

durability. By the Eastern Han dynasty, these robes had become essential attire for brides during their weddings. The higher the status, the more options there were in terms of fabric and color choices[4]. Noblewomen in the Han dynasty had wedding attire with a wide range of colors, up to 12, crafted from top-quality brocade and silk, known as the "elaborate border robe" (see Figure 2). The collars of these robes were distinctive, with a low-cut overlap, revealing the collar of the inner garment, sometimes layered up to three times, also known as the "triple-layered attire." Following the tradition inherited from the Qin dynasty, where black was highly esteemed, attire during this period generally retained the short upper jacket and long lower skirt style. Collars were divided into straight and curved styles, richly adorned with embroidery in a variety of colors, showcasing exquisite craftsmanship. The reenactment of the wedding scene of Lady Xinzhuo, 16 years old at the time, at the first "Cangbo Fair" in Hunan Province, provides a glimpse into the attire and grandeur of weddings from over 2100 years ago (see Figure 3).



Figure 2. The "elaborate bordered robe" of the Qin and Han dynasties



Figure 3. The Grand Han Dynasty Wedding Ceremony Reenacted in Changsha

4. THE WEDDING ATTIRE SYSTEM DURING THE WEI, JIN, NORTHERN, AND SOUTHERN DYNASTIES

During the Wei, Jin, Northern, and Southern Dynasties, influenced by the philosophical trend of "non-action as the foundation, returning to simplicity and pursuing freshness and elegance," a predominant theme emerged in fashion, including wedding attire, characterized by a preference for simplicity and elegance.

The women's wedding attire during the Wei and Jin periods broke away from the traditional styles of the Qin and Han dynasties, showcasing a unique charm. A popular trend during the Northern and Southern Dynasties was the "white wedding attire." Historical records indicate that this white wedding attire was composed of various fabrics, including finely pleated white silk fabrics woven

from fine yarn and thin but durable white silk fabrics. Additionally, decorations were added to the collars, sleeves, and hem of the dresses during the Wei and Jin periods, with the most distinctive being the "xianjian," made of silk fabric resembling a triangular shape with a pointed tip and a wider base, giving the wearer a nimble and ethereal appearance like a fairy. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the length of these pointed decorations was extended, combined with long skirts. Unlike previous eras where white was considered inauspicious, women during the Wei and Jin periods even revered white, with wedding attire crafted in white. This distinct "white wedding attire" can be prominently observed in historical dramas set in the Sui and Tang dynasties. To delve deeper into the roots of this trend, it is closely related to the social atmosphere of the time. Furthermore, the prevalence of Buddhism during the Wei, Jin, Northern, and Southern Dynasties played a significant role, as white was highly valued in Buddhist culture, influencing the aesthetic preferences for clothing colors. Women during this period showcased their unique style through innovative wedding attire, combining elegance with freshness and embracing the spirit of their era, characterized by bold individuality and freedom.

5. THE WEDDING ATTIRE SYSTEM DURING THE TANG DYNASTY

During the Tang Dynasty, wedding attire evolved to encompass both the previous solemn and sacred elements and the later lively and festive characteristics. According to the "Six Codes of the Tang Dynasty," it is recorded: "For marriages, flower hairpins and ceremonial clothes are worn. Wives of sixth-grade officials and below wear them (the hairpins are simply placed on the hairpin board, with hairpins on both sides decorated with gold, silver, and mixed jewels[5]. The ceremonial clothes are wide-sleeved connected robes made of green fabric)." This indicates that Tang Dynasty brides wore the style of flower hairpins and ceremonial clothes, featuring wide-sleeved shirts, long skirts, and draped fabrics, with gold and emerald flower hairpins on their heads, hence referred to as "flower hairpins and ceremonial clothes". The use of flower hairpins had strict hierarchical rules, and the style of flower hairpins and ceremonial clothes varied among women of different ranks. There were many colors and patterns for flower hairpins and ceremonial clothes, but for wedding attire, they were mainly in green, symbolizing blessings and representing the deep clothing style, signifying women's virtue of devotion and loyalty.

The ceremonial clothes for noble ladies were similar to flower hairpins and ceremonial clothes, with the only difference being the embroidered bird patterns, inherited from the customs of the Qin Dynasty. Tang Dynasty brides also wore veils when they left their parents' homes. As recorded by Gao Cheng in the "Records of Things and Events," after the Yonghui period, women in the Tang Dynasty wore veils. These veils, also known as "gaitou," were a female garment introduced from the Western Regions, consisting of a crown with a draped veil, covering the entire body, similar to the "jing" worn by brides in the Zhou Dynasty; the "weimao" was shorter than the gaitou, with the veil only reaching the neck, covering only the face, sometimes revealing the front. Additionally, it was popular during the Tang and Song dynasties for brides to use folding fans to cover their faces when leaving their parents' homes[6]. It was not until the night of the wedding when the bride and groom met face-to-face that the bride lowered the fan, known as the "removing the fan" ritual.

During the Sui and Tang periods, especially the Tang Dynasty, the wedding attire developed towards a more colorful and vibrant direction due to the prosperous economy and open-minded culture. The use of semi-transparent fabrics like sha was common, exposing the skin, distinguishing it from other dynasties. In terms of color, Tang Dynasty wedding attire for men was scarlet, while for women, it was green, hence the phrase "red for men, green for women." The Dunhuang murals also depict the appearance of Tang Dynasty women's wedding attire. Examples include Cave 116 on the north wall of the prosperous Tang period (see Figure 4) and Cave 12 on the south wall of the late Tang period (see Figure 5). The brides are adorned with pearl and emerald hairpins, wearing decorative belts and robes in green and red, with high saturation and brightness. Comparing with other wedding images,

most brides during the prosperous Tang period had green wedding attire, while those in the late Tang period had blue-toned attire, both in the green color spectrum but with varying degrees of hue [7].



Figure 4. The portrayal of Tang Dynasty brides



Figure 5. The portrayal of brides during the Late Tang Dynasty

6. WEDDING ATTIRE DURING THE SONG AND YUAN DYNASTIES

During the Song and Yuan Dynasties, there was a significant emphasis on ethical principles, epitomized by the maxim "uphold celestial principles and extinguish human desires," which served as the highest standard for moral cultivation during that period. This ideological framework led to a notable shift in aesthetic perceptions. The Song Dynasty promoted simplicity and plainness in attire, opposing extravagance and waste[8]. The wedding attire of the Song Dynasty evolved from the Han and Tang Dynasties while also introducing innovations. The "Records of Dress and Ceremonial Rites" in the Song History documented that "large sleeves, plain-colored collars, long skirts, xiapei (a type of scarf), jade pendants, and embroidered collars were all made of crimson satin, indistinguishable from those of ministers and officials." At that time, many women wore "large sleeves" and xiapei as ceremonial attire, combining these elements to form the "large-sleeved garment." This attire was similar in structure to the wedding attire of the Tang Dynasty, known as hua chai li yi, as both were made using the same cutting methods, with the main difference being that the large sleeves were symmetrical at the front. For affluent families and those in officialdom, the bride's ceremonial attire included a golden skirt or a long red skirt, often with large sleeves in red. Women during the Song Dynasty typically wore low chignons, giving them a fresh and refined appearance without appearing overly captivating. The xiapei and floral crowns were complementary accessories to the large-sleeved garment. The xiapei was a type of shawl-like garment for women, wider at the top and narrower at the bottom, with a round pendant hanging from its lower end, usually made of gold for noble families, known as a golden pendant. Most xiapei were double-layered and made of thick fabric. After the

Song Dynasty, xiapei became designated attire for married women, with the embroidery on them varying based on their social rank. The floral crowns worn as the first ceremonial attire for weddings were even more elaborate, especially for royal consorts and other noble classes, adorned with phoenix and bird decorations, known as the phoenix crown[9]. Officially classifying the phoenix crown as ceremonial attire and including it in the "system of ceremonial attire" began in the Song Dynasty, reflecting the societal norms of male superiority and female subservience, aligning with the concurrent cultural and ideological shifts of that era.

7. WEDDING ATTIRE CUSTOMS IN THE MING DYNASTY

Today, the most familiar Han Chinese wedding attire is the brightly colored embroidered dragon and phoenix auspicious robe, the phoenix crown and veil, and the red bridal veil, which were established as distinct wedding attire during the Ming Dynasty[10]. Ming Dynasty wedding attire represents an important archetype of later traditional Chinese wedding garments. Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of the Ming Dynasty, began to eliminate foreign clothing after unifying the country, promoting the restoration of traditional Chinese attire. He issued a decree stating, "In the year of Renzi, the clothing and headwear shall follow the Tang Dynasty style." The royal wedding attire system was relatively strict, encompassing regulations on style, design patterns, and fabric usage.

Historical records describe the emperor's wedding attire as a grand ceremonial robe consisting of a crown, a black robe with red lining, a knee-length skirt, a wide belt, a large sash, red socks, and red shoes, all in the color vermilion. The empress's wedding attire was even more elaborate, with records from the Ming Dynasty detailing her wearing a crown adorned with nine dragons and four phoenixes, a deep blue silk dress with cloud and dragon patterns embroidered in gold thread along the neckline and cuffs, and a jade-colored skirt embroidered with auspicious patterns in silk[11]. The attire for noblewomen varied based on their husbands' ranks, typically comprising a phoenix crown or ornate hairpins, a red silk robe with wide sleeves or a coat with large sleeves, a veil, a belt, and embroidered shoes. The headdress often featured elaborate embroidery and tassels[12].

As the influence of popular culture grew, there was a relaxation in wedding attire regulations. Commoners began to wear attire typically reserved for officials, and officials and their families wore attire above their rank. This led to the phenomenon of sanctioned "mock attire," where commoners could wear imitation official attire for weddings. For instance, the groom might wear a green or blue ninth-rank official's robe, while the bride wore a phoenix crown and veil. This practice eventually gave rise to the term "bridegroom official[13]." Daughters of officials could wear attire matching their mother's status, and ordinary citizens could wear public official attire in deep red. There were even instances where common brides wore the phoenix crown and veil reserved for official consorts[14]. These flexible wedding attire regulations reflected the relatively open and inclusive nature of Ming Dynasty society. While maintaining a sense of tradition and hierarchy, the attire rules also accommodated personal preferences and cultural shifts, ultimately serving to reinforce social order and political stability during the Ming Dynasty[15].

8. THE STRUCTURE OF WEDDING ATTIRE IN THE QING DYNASTY PERIOD

During the early Qing Dynasty, the wedding attire of Han Chinese brides in the populace largely followed the clothing system of the Ming Dynasty. Through long-term interactions, exchanges, and intermarriages between the Manchu and Han peoples, an important characteristic emerged in the clothing customs of the Qing Dynasty, marking the fusion of Manchu and Han attire cultures. The most common form of women's wedding attire during the Qing Dynasty period consisted of the phoenix crown (fengguan), cloud shoulder (yunjian), gown and skirt (guaqun), and a large red head covering (gaitou). Among these, the gown and skirt (guaqun) was a typical product of the fusion of

Manchu and Han attire, while the phoenix crown (fengguan), cloud shoulder (yunjian), and large red head covering (gaitou) were of Han ethnic attire, with slight changes compared to the Ming Dynasty period. Typically, the wedding attire of Han Chinese women during the Qing Dynasty consisted of wearing a phoenix crown (fengguan) and covering it with a red head covering (gaotou). They wore a red silk blouse inside and a red embroidered robe outside, with exquisite patterns. The lower body attire included a large red skirt and red pants, with embroidered flower shoes in red silk. They draped a Xiapei over their shoulders, wore Tian Guan locks or pearl necklaces around their necks[16].



Figure 6. Qing Dynasty Xiapei



Figure 7. Vintage Photographs of Qing Dynasty Wedding Attire



Figure 8. Vintage Photos of Qing Dynasty Wedding Attire

The phoenix crown (fengguan) of the Qing Dynasty was called the Chaoguan, and there were significant differences in both style and material between the Chaoguan of the Qing Dynasty consorts and the phoenix crowns of previous periods. In the folk tradition, the phoenix crowns worn by newlywed Han Chinese brides in the Qing Dynasty had wider Xiapeis compared to the Ming Dynasty, with the sides merging and adding back pieces and collars, shaped like vests (see Figure 6), without pendants at the lower corners of the Xiapei but decorated with tassels, and adorned with patches corresponding to the husband's status in the center of the chest and back ., worn with Chaozhu(see Figure 7). During the Qing Dynasty period, whether officials or commoners, brides could wear phoenix crowns and Xiapeis during weddings to signify the bride's status as the legal wife rather than a concubine. The attire for ordinary women during marriage ceremonies was more of a blouse and skirt style. The blouse was either in dark red or dark cyan with embroidered designs, mainly featuring double happiness, mandarin ducks, and floral branches for folk patterns, and dragon and phoenix motifs for royal use. Because the gown and skirt were embroidered with gold and silver threads, they were also called "nail gold" embroidery. Qing Dynasty gowns and skirts were mostly paired with black tops and red skirts. However, only legal wives had the right to wear red skirts; concubines could not. There were various types of skirts for Han Chinese women during the Qing Dynasty, such as pleated skirts, phoenix-tail skirts, moon flower skirts, horse-face skirts, and skirt with narrow bottom folds, all prevalent during that era. As an undergarment for wedding attire, there were red joy skirts, phoenix-tail skirts, etc., generally in dark red color with embroidered decorations on the surface. The red joy skirt came in single-piece long skirts and skirt with narrow bottom folds styles. A popular accessory among women was the cloud shoulder (yunjian) (see Figure 8)., mainly used to cover hair stains during daily life but also widely used during wedding festivities, serving as a substitute for Xiapei. Its shape resembled a Ruyi, elegant in form, draped over the shoulders with strong decorative features. Towards the later Qing Dynasty period, traditional Chinese attire faced strong influences from Western culture, leading to changes in both the style and form of clothing[17]. A fusion of Chinese and Western attire or purely Western-style attire gradually entered Chinese life. The coexistence of old and new styles as well as a blend of Chinese and Western elements became prominent. Women's wedding attire began to incorporate Qipao, greatly influenced by the wedding attire of the Republican era.

9. SUMMARY

The ancient wedding attire culture is a brilliant gem in the treasure trove of Chinese traditional culture. Some of these wedding attires are luxurious and splendid, while others are dignified and elegant, all representing the highest standards of social clothing at that time and reflecting the social background. Through in-depth research on the historical evolution, cultural connotations, and aesthetic characteristics of ancient wedding attire, we can more comprehensively understand the unique charm of Chinese traditional wedding attire culture and its important position in historical and cultural heritage. In modern society, we have a responsibility to inherit and promote this excellent traditional culture, and through innovation, inspire its new vitality and vigor, making our own contribution to the prosperity and development of Chinese ethnic culture.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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