



The reasons for the constant changes in the female ideal beauty during ancient China

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Abstract: In different periods in ancient China, the origin and evolution of female beauty ideals were quite different. To figure out the reasons for that, we analyze some historical books, research documents, and archaeological discoveries on female beauty. In this study, we argue that female ideal beauty in ancient China basically changed with the preferences of those in power at that time. However, what cannot be ignored is the wisdom of ancient Chinese women who catered to those in power but tried to pursue beauty outside the crevices of social survival.

Keywords: Ancient women; Female beauty ideals; Cosmetics; Clothes & Accessories

1. The origin and formation of ancient female beauty ideals in china

It is believed that ancient Chinese beauty originated from utensils and totem patterns, which are considered to be both practical and aesthetic. In the matriarchal society period, among the many ornaments found in archaeology, animal teeth and canine teeth account for most of them. Initially, animal teeth were likely to be worn as a symbol of the spoils, then evolved into ornaments. Similarly, the decorations of colored stones found represent women's wit, full of their pure and creative aesthetic feeling. That is far from the ideas that later generations gave on decorations.

With the extinction of matrilineal society, ornaments have gradually become the exclusive articles for women. In addition, the change of power and technology has made ornaments to some extent reflect the contemporary female beauty ideals and constraints on women. Thus, the female ideal beauty in ancient China began to form.

2. Women's pursuit of beauty

This article believes that women's pursuit of beauty is gradually changing with historical changes. It is said in *The Strategy of the Warring States* that "a lady makes up for the man who loves her". There are many explanations for the meaning of this sentence. Even if one of them comprehends it as "beauty comes from admiration", the pursuit of beauty can still be seen. As history changes, women's pursuit of beauty is also changing gradually. For example, in ancient times, there is an old saying that "The king of Chu likes a thin waist, so women in the palace starve to death". Later in the Tang Dynasty, it was women with a plump figure that were largely welcomed. In fact, in the long history, women's pursuit of beauty more or less caters to the taste of the authorities.

In the primitive times, due to the low production level and the matrilineal society, the pursuit of beauty reflected the importance of fertility. In the pre-Qin period, female beauty ideals began to be united with those in power. For instance, there are poems reflecting the beauty of women's body, such as "hands are like catkin, skin like cream", "gentlemen pursue gentle and graceful lady" in *The Book of Songs*.

During the late Wei-Jin period, there was a huge cultural collision. The emperors preferred feminine men, which led to a preference for delicate aesthetic styles throughout the period. In the Tang Dynasty, the political situation was stable,

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the economy was prosperous, and the culture was diversified. At this time, the ideal female beauty correspondingly presented the image of elegance. There was also xianbei lineage among the nobles, so the Tang people regarded plump as charming. Women in the Tang Dynasty tended to regard fat as beauty and advocated masculine and generous aesthetic standards.

Later in the Song Dynasty, Cheng and Zhu's neo-confucianism became popular and imprisoned the thinking of people at that time. The literati controlled the aesthetic concepts of the whole Song Dynasty. One of the most harsh example the "three-inch golden lotus" aesthetic preference for women's feet, which had been circulating for hundreds of years. In this way, the female beauty ideals during the Song Dynasty significantly differed from that in the Tang Dynasty. Both the makeup and body at that time were fresh and light. It is completely two extremes with the dignity and grace of Tang Dynasty.

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the ideal female beauty can be seen from the well-known novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*. The writer Cao describes Lin Daiyu as a weak and sick girl, whereas Xue Baocha looks "face like the silver bowl, eye like the apricot, with red lip and dark green eyebrow". Such images embody the female ideal beauty during Ming and Qing dynasties. To be specific, one is a morbid beauty, and another is the lady with delicate facial.

With the development of civilization and technological progress, women choose to use decorations to make themselves closer to the aesthetic appreciation of those in power. Among them, the styles of makeup, clothing and jewelry can best reflect the ideal female beauty in different periods.

3. Development of cosmetic items and make-up styles

3.1 Correlation between ancient cosmetics and female beauty

Since ancient times, makeup is closely related to female beauty. In every period, makeup is the best way for women to fit in with the aesthetic preference at that time. In modern times, makeup is still a way for women to pursue beauty, and cosmetics somehow reflect the wisdom and desire of women for beauty in all generations.

The earliest makeup custom had already emerged in the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties, and there were descriptions of "fragrant soup bath" and "moon powder dressing". By the Time of Zhou Emperor, women in palace began to pound the red orchids from Yan areas into juice, which became the earliest rouge after solidification and was then called Yan Zhi (rouge). During the reign of King Wen of The Zhou Dynasty, women used zinc powder extensively to whiten their faces and long thin eyebrows. By the Spring and Autumn Period, makeup was popular among common women.

3.2 Cosmetics and female beauty ideals change make-up styles

Wei-jin period, the Chinese Ancient And Modern Note recorded that Wei Wen emperor favor a palace maid, who "wears shoes made by brocade, and uses rouge of purple powder". Although such a purple makeup face was rare at the time, it did help women receive the imperial favor. The reason is that in China purple is a symbol of luxury, which caters to the preference of people in power.

After the Sui and Tang Dynasties, Chinese make-up customs gradually became a complete system, with diversified development of make-up techniques and styles. In addition to the white powder, red rouge, smoke-ink painting of eyebrows and purple lips handed down all the time, there were also various make-up techniques such as applique tin, dot face nightmare, and oblique red drawing.

The literati of the Song Dynasty advocated the female beauty of freshness and elegance, and opposed women's use of makeups and powder. Under such a gap, women still showed their wisdom in pursuing beauty--changing the style of flower tin and trying nail art. In the Song Dynasty, women decorated their cheeks with pearls of light and elegant color, sticking to their foreheads and cheeks, which not only controlled the overall style of freshness and lightness, but also showed their pursuit of beauty. At the same time, women began to use impatiens to color their nails, making the pursuit of beauty to the extreme.

When the Yuan Dynasty entered the Central Plains, it was subjected to Chinese culture. Before Emperor Shun, it advocated a period of luxuriant style similar to that of Tang Dynasty. After that, it suddenly turned into a light and simple one, and cosmetics similar to masks appeared.

4. The pursuit and embodiment of beauty in clothing in different periods in ancient times

4.1 The origin and development of clothing and decoration

Textual research on unearthed cultural relics from archaeological excavations found that the ancient Chinese costume culture can be traced back to the late Paleolithic period of primitive society. Then, the original human has already mastered grinding drilling technology, can make stone tools, bows and arrows, as well as clothes made of animal skins. Adornment includes canine teeth, bones and women grinding colored small stones and other small items.

With the development of subsequent technology and culture, clothing began to be made of cloth, silk, brocade and other materials. It became an item that not only covered the body but also symbolized the status. Especially for women's clothing, there were various styles. The changes in clothing styles have continued to modern times. Specifically, the clothing shapes have changed in each dynasty.

Ornaments have evolved from colored stone bones that can only be strung together and hung on the neck and wrists into jewelry. There are headgear, ear gear, neck jewelry, hand jewelry, and baldric jewelry. The styles and grades of jewelry in different dynasties and generations also changed with the development of clothing.

4.2 Influence of headwear on female beauty ideal

With the development of culture, headwear gradually became a symbol of status. For example, the empress's ceremonial crown was used in the Tang Dynasty and prevailed in the Song, Ming and Qing dynasties. The shape of the crown was different in each dynasty, with ornaments such as pearl flowers and treasure tins, which reflected the technology and cultural preferences of the dynasty.

The authority has endowed the crown with the symbolic meaning of identity, which promotes the tendency of women to wear beautiful and precious headgear. Meanwhile, the headgear used should also fit the identity. Besides, there is another reason for the changes in the shape of the headgear—the revision and improvement of the ritual system in the Tang and Song Dynasties. The ritual system in ancient China is the inheritance and innovation of the previous dynasty. Every repair and improvement will make the corresponding ritual costumes fit the ritual system. Thus, it can be seen that in addition to beauty, the headwear that women pursue is also a symbol of status.

4.3 Diversity of ancient clothing

In ancient China, there were different shapes and styles of clothing in each period, of which men and women are also different. Generally speaking, people wear clothes (yi) on the upper body, and skirts (shang) on the lower body, which are later called clothes (yi shang). At the same time, it has the characteristics of bundled hair and right gusset.

In the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties, costume forms and systems were similar. However, there was a strict hierarchical system. For example, dyeing textiles, silk fabrics and ornaments were all enjoyed by the slave-owning class. The costume culture was controlled by the aristocracy, which was also the reason why cosmetics and costumes were not popular among common women until the Spring and Autumn and warring States periods.

After the Western Zhou Dynasty, the special boundaries and grades of costumes were clearly marked, and the varieties of costumes were increased accordingly. The system of crown ceremony was created, which was the dress system continuously followed by later generations. At that time, the sleeves of ancient costumes were gradually enlarged. In the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States Period, deep clothing and Hu clothing began to be popularized. The shape of the deep clothing is that the upper and lower clothes are joined together, without slit, and the skirt is lengthened. Moreover, the Hu clothing mainly refers to the clothing of trousers.

In Qin and Han dynasty, the dress system inherited the Western Zhou dynasty and the Spring and Autumn And Warring States, clothes basically use deep clothes system. To be specific, women wear clothes of curved styles, wound in the lower body for several layers. In Han Dynasty, working women always wear short jacket on upper body, and skirt in lower body. For man, they wore undergarments on the upper body, calf-nose pants on the lower body, and a sarong on the outside. This kind of attire does not divide the grade.

During the Wei-Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, due to the chaos caused by wars, the whole Han clothes and decoration was very mixed, and the north and South cultures blended, which can be described as “rich and colorful”. In

Wei-Jin period, dress basically inherit Qin and Han's old system. Women in the Southern Dynasties mainly wear undergarments, with skirts as the orthodox dress, and "robes" and "shirts" as mandatory clothing. In the Northern, jacket is worn commonly, whereas the actual form and system do not differ from the Southern Dynasty.

In the Sui and Tang dynasties, in addition to the undergarments, big shirts and silks that were followed by previous customs, there were also hoes such as curly brimmed hats and lapel coats. After the Anshi Rebellion, this trend gradually ceased. The clothing of the Song Dynasty was roughly the same as that of the Tang Dynasty, and women also wore skirts and shirts. However, there appears open-crotch pants and crotch pants during that period. In other words, women in the song dynasty wear pants within skirts.

There are two styles of female dress in Yuan Dynasty: noble and common. The noble style is mostly wide robe, with narrow sleeves and wide sleeve. In Yuan Dynasty, civilian women wear Han skirts, and half-arm style is also quite popular. The Han costume of the Ming Dynasty had a great influence, reaching as far as Korea, Japan, Ryukyu and other vassal states. Women's dresses were shaped like pleated skirts, horse face skirts, and pit-sleeve slanted or narrow-sleeve jackets with standing collar.

The Manchu costume of the Qing Dynasty was quite different from that of the Han. It is believed that the traditional ritual system was also destroyed. Jacket and cheongsam were used for both men and women.

5. Conclusion

According to the extant ancient materials, female beauty ideal was based on power first, and then the concept of beauty would be considered. In the matriarchal society period, the female beauty ideals were colored by reproduction worship, and the most primitive pursuit of female beauty was revealed in their decorations. However, in the patriarchal society, the first consideration for female beauty ideals became whether the people in power and the direction of male power like it or not. Just as we discussed above, the aesthetic tendency of female beauty after the king of Chu, the Song Dynasty, and the entry of the Manchu people all have a certain political color. Therefore, we propose that the trend of female beauty ideals in ancient China largely changes with the political background in certain period. Nevertheless, cases of women's pure pursuit of beauty under such constraints cannot be ignored.

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