

Study on Culture and Design of Female Underwear in the Ming Dynasty

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Abstract

The article is mainly about the historical background and design details of female underwear in the Ming dynasty. Through the analyses of the evolution of styles, materials, colors, patterns, and crafts of female underwear in the Ming Dynasty, the research shows that the cultural connotation behind the design of underwear. During the history of nearly 300 years of the Ming Dynasty, the social environment and cultural background of various periods, including Neo-Confucianism and Yangming's Mindology, economic and social development in different periods, social ethos and customs, have all contributed to the aesthetic orientation and design of female underwear in the Ming Dynasty. The research of design and development of Ming's female underwear is the inheritance and development of the wisdom of traditional creations, and it is of great significance to the development and protection of Chinese underwear culture.

Keywords: female underwear, the Ming Dynasty, ancient, aesthetics, historical background

Underwear, in ancient times, was called "xieyi", which refers to clothes worn inside and net to the skin. The history of Chinese underwear culture has a long history. At each turning point of history, underwear changed with different cultural backgrounds and derived different patterns and appellations. To know well about the history of Chinese underwear, the development of underwear in the Ming Dynasty cannot be neglected. Clothing is a witness to the progress of human civilization, and constantly changing with the development of society. Ming's underwear has distinctive time and space characteristics and contains the lifestyle, artistic aesthetic and moral cultivation of the Ming Dynasty. It reflects the society, economy, culture, politics, customs, etc. in the Ming Dynasty. The research on the underwear of the Ming Dynasty helps excavate the unique aesthetic concept and humanistic connotation of traditional underwear culture, which is of great significance to the inheritance and development of Chinese traditional culture.

The review of relevant literature reveals that domestic research on underwear in the Ming Dynasty is relatively rare. This research is dedicated to further excavating the cultural connotation and heritage of the Ming Dynasty by exploring and researching the styles, colors, and materials of Ming's female underwear.

1. The Basic Types of Ming's Female Underwear

Ming's Female Underwear can be roughly divided into two categories: tops (which also known as "shangyi" in Chinese) and bottoms (which also known as "xiachang" in Chinese). The tops include tube top, zhuyao, button-down shan, xiaobao, etc., while bottoms include xiaoyi, liyi, pleat skirt, kunku, silk skirt, pant skirt, and danqun, etc.

1.1 Tops

In the early Ming Dynasty, most people chose shan for daily wear. Shan, refers to a kind of underwear that has no sleeves and is loose as well as easy for daily wearing. There are several styles of shan, including duanru, tight-fit shan, and loose-fit shan. Most of the shans are in the form of the button-down. Similar to the gown at that time, the collar of the shan is breasted or cross lapel. Shan is mid-length, and the hem is floating between the waist and knees.

Since 1506 AD, tube tops have become popular. The tube top is also called "yaozi" in Chinese, which is a close-fitting bra for protecting the woman's body and breast. The tube top is wrapped around the chest, from the underarm to the navel. It can be divided into two types. One type of tube top is triangular or diamond-shaped and is tied with a tie or buttons at the collar, chest, and waist. The other is cylindrical, made of fabric with some

elasticity. This is one kind of pullover underwear, covers the area above the chest and below the neck.

Another one, called “zhuyao”, evolved from the tube top. Here, "zhu" refers to buckle. This is a kind of underwear similar to the corset, which emphasizes embroidery and usually worn by the Palace maid at that time. There are two types of zhuyao. The simple one, generally, is just a piece of fabric and is tied to the chest. The complex one is vest-like. Opening and lapels are each dressed with three plackets. And it has crotches at the shoulder and a belt on the crotch. The waist of this type has a tie to fasten the entire placket to form a noticeable waist.

The zhuyao can be a single layer as well as a double-layer. The material and lacing method of zhuyao is not much different from the tube top. However, the tube top focuses on covering the chest, while zhuyao focuses on covering the waist. Tube top is generally diamond-shaped, as well as long-strip shaped, with straps on the collar, shoulders, and waist, while zhuyao is generally rectangular-shaped. (Qiang, 2008, pp. 93-106)



Figure 1. Zhuyao of the Ming Dynasty

1.2 Bottoms

One of the most important bottoms in the Ming Dynasty is xiaoyi. Xiaoyi can be considered as tight-fitting panties in the modern context, is also similar to skinny briefs. Xiayi, also called diyi, is not much different from xiaoyi, except that its style is more similar to the flat underwear. In addition to xiaoyi and xiayi, bottoms also include sheer pants, kunku, satin pants and so on. Not everyone wore xiaoyi in the Ming Dynasty, and some wore pants directly. When people wore those long and big pants, which have no crotch, they would tie-up with a belt.

As for women in the Ming Dynasty, they wore skirts all year round. The skirts without lining could be regarded as underwear at that time. But most of those kinds of skirts were worn in summer. Generally, women wore skirt pants, and leggings were worn inside in the cold season.



Figure 2. Skirt of the Ming Dynasty

2. The Artistry of Ming’s Female Underwear

Every piece of underwear is a perfect work of art. Any piece of underwear rests on the countless efforts of the producer and contains a story or some kind of thought. Despite the differences between luxury and simplicity, refinement and roughness, all of them have independent and beautiful forms.

2.1 Materials

Ming's underwear is divided into summer clothing and winter clothing according to the change of season and climate. The comfort, beauty, and functionality of underwear are valued by women. Underwear is close to the skin and easy to fade when sweating. As the dyeing technology was relatively poor in ancient times, underwear was mostly made of natural colored fabric. In summer, the underwear was mostly primary colors, and generally used light, breathable fabrics.

As a close-fitting short gown, shan can be divided into white grass linen shan, bleached shan, pearl shan and so on. Most shan are made of thin cotton or even expensive pearl sheer that is cool in winter and warm in summer. Tube tops are mainly made of gauze, silk, and satin. As for bottoms, the main fabrics are silk, gauze, satin, etc., providing with comfort and soft feeling. During the wintertime, underwear emphasizes warmth and made from thicker cotton. People of different social classes also had different preferences for underwear fabric. In addition to the common people who wore cloth made of coarse fabric, linen and batik fabric, some rich people wore silk clothes. Silk is favored by women because of its soft, comfortable, colorful, noble and thin characteristics, and it has become the first choice for underwear fabrics.

Material selection for women's underwear is more careful. For example, the underwear is trimmed with a fine silk or floral cloth. Besides, the rare jewels and precious beads are used to suspend the underwear. The diversity of fabrics and the careful selection of decorative materials showed that Ming's people paid much attention to underwear.

2.2 Colors

Because of the privacy of underwear, it was less restricted by the traditional clothing class system. The color of underwear was diverse, and the color combination was freer.

The color of underwear mainly has a five-color system, plus the other three colors, including black, white and gold. In the five-color system, bright yellow is the most distinguished color, followed is pink green, while other colors such as black and white are usually used by common people rather than social elites. Bright yellow is a sacred color and can only wear by the ancient Royal members. Except the explicit prohibition of the use of bright yellow, there are no clear restrictions for other colors. There are also stipulations for the color matching of the ornaments, and colors are used to distinguish esteem. Cyan, natural white and brown are used by the common people while pink, pink green and pink blue are used by Palace maids. As for Royal members, gold, yellow, and blue are the first choices.

Red has been favored by women from all classes and is used in different underwear. Red silk tube top, Peach-red sheer zhuyao, Silver-red brocade and some other clothing were popular in the Ming Dynasty. Red not only represents joy but also means disaster relief and aggressiveness. As the first intuitive element of underwear, color can reflect people's moods. After the middle of the Ming Dynasty, the showy colors could better reflect the innermost of people and their pursuit of love and sex.

2.3 Styles

The style of underwear reflects the social atmosphere and people's ideological situation in different periods. In the early Ming Dynasty, in general, it was taboo to reveal the body curve. People wore the loose-fitting shan to cover the body strictly. Even in the private life of couples, they were opposed to the direct exposure of underwear. Some people would like to wear tube tops inside shan. After 1521 AD, Ming's underwear became the synonym of openness and oomph. Underwear in this period was mainly tight and fit. Whether it was zhuyao, tube top or xiaoyi, etc., they showed the graceful curves of the female body.

2.4 Patterns

The decoration of women's underwear was not completely limited by Confucianism, and no sage would study and judge women's underwear. Under this circumstance, the theme of underwear decoration was abundant. People would like to harmoniously display all kinds of stories and elements such as landscapes, flowers and birds, auspicious patterns, immortals, myths, opera characters, and lively characters in their underwear. For women, they showed their love, hope, and resentment on this square inch of cloth that covered their bodies, and expressed their unspeakable aesthetic thoughts with pure feelings.

The patterns of Ming's female underwear reflect the harmonious unity of beauty and content. The patterns used for decoration have auspicious meanings, for example, pomegranate means numerous descendants, peony flower, which is endowed with dazzling beauty, is the symbol of wealth. And gourd is the homophonic word of "hulu" in Chinese, meaning good fortune and ample salary. The Ganoderma, a precious Chinese herb, means "everything

goes well" due to its ruyi-like shape. Peach and chrysanthemum imply the good wishes of longevity. It also borrows the names of certain things to form homophones to express auspicious meaning. Such as magnolia, begonia and peony are put together to be a "yutangfugui" which means fortunate and wealthy. And five gourds plus four conchs are homophonic to "wuhusihai". (Huang & Chen, 2004, pp. 476-483) Text patterns also cannot be ignored, the text of "卍", "shou", "fu", and "xi" are all commonly used. Besides, cloud grain, eight-treasure grain, square grain, and tortoiseshell grain are interspersed for the harmony of the design. All these patterns express the desire and pursuit of a happy life.

The decorative art of the patterns in the Ming's underwear was not only expressed by the independent patterns, but also by the originality of the pattern layout. These patterns enriched the humanistic atmosphere of underwear and add beauty, decoration, and fun to underwear as well.



Figure 3. Combination Pattern

2.5 Crafts

Common techniques for making underwear included flat seaming, embroidery, patching, etc in the Ming Dynasty. The fine craftsmanship was reflected in the moderate tightness and natural appearance of the manual needle method in the old days.

Some crafts of shan are very sophisticated and complicated, including brocading, gold thread weaving, biandi-gold, biandi-brocading, and so on. The representative underwear includes biandi-gold shan with buttons down the front, cloudy thin silk shan with gold thread and cloudy silk shan with brocading. The weft of biandi-gold fabric is all woven with gold thread, twisted gold thread or twisted silver thread. Gold threads are used in all or a part of the gold woven fabrics, and various gold threads or silver threads are interwoven in colorful brocade. Gold woven fabrics usually do not have many patterns. When it comes to brocading, this craft was originally used on satin, and then developed and applied to fabrics of different textures such as sheer, silk, thin silk, and velvet. All these complicated craftsmanship make the fabrics noble and elegant.

3. Factors Affecting the Development of Ming's Female Underwear

The underwear of the Ming Dynasty had different characteristics in different periods, and the appearance of different underwear was affected by a variety of factors.

3.1 Influence of Culture on Ming's Female Underwear

Hongwu Emperor led troops to overthrow the Yuan dynasty's rule and re-advocated the restoration of the Han civilized tradition and lifestyles. Neo-Confucianism was the dominant thought of this era. People's thoughts were imprisoned by Feudal Ethics and Asceticism. People were ashamed of talking about underwear and showing their bodies, and costumes also restored the traditional Han style. The style of underwear has also changed, things like zhuyao, tube tops, xiaoyi, diyi, etc. appeared at that time. Because of the revival of Han culture, underwear at that time was similar to the Song's style. People's conservatism was reflected in their underwear. The length of the bra was lengthened to the waist, more like a long vest. People putted on layer after layer of clothes to conceal their shape and charm of women.

By the late Ming Dynasty, Yangming's Mindology began to spread and develop on a large scale. Under the guidance of Mindology, human subject status had been affirmed, and the focus of Mindology was human initiative. The value of "human desire" had been affirmed by many scholars, including Li Zhi. The introduction

of Western learning into China had a profound and pervasive influence on people's thoughts. With Zheng He's voyages to the West, exotic customs and dressing habits also directly affected Chinese dressing habits, especially for women's dressing. Under the social environment at that time, costumes became extremely bold, and underwear could be worn outside. People realized their importance and showed their thoughts through clothes. The change of people's thinking also led to the change of underwear design. People began to pay more attention to the aesthetics of underwear, especially in terms of color and pattern. At this time, people's underwear had greater tolerance, color and pattern became abundant.

3.2 Influence of Economic and Social Development on Ming's Female Underwear

The sprout of capitalism in the Jiangnan region has gradually thrived in the middle of the Ming Dynasty. Most of the nearby villages also gradually started to spin and weave, got rid of the farmland-based feudal economic routine for two thousand years. At this time, signs of the textile industry appeared. The emergence of the textile industry has directly changed the colors, fabrics, patterns, and materials of the original clothing, which has greatly ensured the diversity of underwear.

The budding of capitalist ideals and the emergence of business models made the independent small businesses show a tenacious momentum. The development of the Age of Consumption brought tremendous impact to the society which ruled by the traditional Han culture for thousands of years and broken the restrictions and etiquette on clothing. Besides, changes in women's perceptions of life have also led to dramatic changes in clothing. The shape, color, and materials of underwear tended to be gorgeous and luxurious, and female underwear also showed the characteristics of sexy and exposure. Underwear became colorful and people began to use a lot of different reds on underwear. And women began to focus on the design of underwear. The uses of different techniques made the patterns of underwear more complex and unique.

3.3 Influence of Social Ethos on Ming's Female Underwear

In the middle of the Ming Dynasty, the Emperor Zhengde and literates indulged in sensuality, traditional ethics slacked as well. The traditional social hierarchy has been greatly impacted, and the clothing taboos were not strict at the same time. People do not regarded sexual affairs as obscurity. The sloppy atmosphere has permeated into all corners of society, and the indulgence of wine and sex has become a trend of the times and a trend of the times. The naked pursuit of sensuality in the trend of social thought reflected that underwear serves as a symbol of rebellious asceticism. The clothing at that time naturally shows traces of luxury, exposure, and eroticism. As a result, underwear was designed to be more and more sexy, exposed, and open. And a large number of women would wear such bold and unstrained underwear.



Figure 4. The Golden Lotus painted by Hu, Y. F.

3.4 Habits and Customs of Ming's Female Underwear

Women of that era were aware of the sexual charm of underwear. The open mood of society has made some women with an open mind realized that the beauty of clothing is not only reflected in the external beauty but also can convey emotion and subjective consciousness through the clothing itself. To highlight their outstanding style, some women deliberately opened the outer coat to expose their graceful waist. In *The Golden Lotus*, Jinlian Pan, who long for true love, was directly wearing exposed underwear to show her graceful figure and boundless

charm, hoping to get the love of men. Pan passed her longing and pursuit of sex and love through sexy wearing and no doubt that she was a practitioner of such social ethos at the time (Qiang, 2004, pp. 108-109).

The underwear expressed the women's emotional appeal and aesthetic taste at the time. Therefore, in terms of the fabric and color of the underwear, according to folk customs, they all expressed women's desire for love and sex.

The underwear dress code in the north of China during this period was very characteristic. In the middle of the Ming Dynasty, the northern people had no habit of wearing underwear. Thanks to the heat-able brick bed, the northern people felt warm enough so they didn't wear underwear in someplace, such as the bedroom. Different from this, the South tended to wear exposed underwear. It is related to the fact that summer in the south is hot. However, the opening social Ethos gave a more adequate explanation. Advocating extravagant luxury became a manifestation of the moral degeneration of the world. The description in *The Golden Lotus* not only showed that it is a custom not to wear underwear (Qiang, 1998), but also showed the opening of the social atmosphere in the middle of the Ming Dynasty.

4. Discussion

Through the combination of underwear materials, colors, patterns, and shapes, with exquisitely crafted embroidery, Ming's female underwear expresses women's requirements for underwear's protection function, cold protection function, and aesthetic requirements. The underwear of the Ming Dynasty not only has the function of protecting the human body but also carry the strong spiritual sustenance of women.

In the early Ming Dynasty, the styles of underwear were relatively conservative due to the convergence and restrictions of thoughts, and the underwear was keener to cover the body strictly. By the middle of Ming, propriety disintegration led to the collapse of clothing grade disorder. The social atmosphere is erotic, and with the secularization of underwear, women are beginning to realize that clothing can be used to convey subjective emotions and be used in practice. The social sentiment is gradually becoming erotic and followed by, women have begun to realize that underwear can be used to convey subjective emotions and apply this perspective to the practice. The design style of underwear became tight and exposed. Both colors and patterns gradually became rich and varied, especially for patterns, which had more design ideas and contained more emotions.

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