

Observations on the "Body" in the Study of Fashion History: A Discussion on the Emergence of the Stand-up Collar in Late Ming

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Abstract

The study of fashion history is an important category in the research of everyday life history. From a historical perspective, the study of fashion focuses more on the relationship between clothing, people, and life. Based on a view of the body, this article takes the popularity of the "stand-up collar" in women's clothing during the Late Ming period as an example and rethinks the changes in fashion. This paper believes that the popularity of the stand-up collar in Late Ming was mainly related to keeping warm. The "protective collar" on the crossover neckline and the combination of buttons formed the prototype of the stand-up collar. Subsequently, the stand-up collar was combined with both the large lapel and double-breasted cutting methods, constituting the main popular style of women's clothing in the middle and late Ming periods, and having a profound impact on later generations.

Keywords

Fashion History Research; Body Observation; Stand-up Collar.

1. The Stand-up Collar: An Evolution in Chinese Fashion

The brilliance of Chinese clothing spanning five thousand years mainly focuses on the changes in "collars, lapels, sleeves, and hems." [1] The variations of these parts combined to define distinctive fashion eras. Taking women's fashion as an example, Tang Dynasty women are best represented by "Ru skirts", while Song Dynasty women are represented by "Bei dresses". Come the Ming Dynasty, rulers restored the clothing system of the Han and Tang Dynasties, making Ru skirts and Bei dresses the main attire for Ming women.

In Late Ming, a very popular "vertical collar" style emerged, characterized by its upright collar around the neck. This style continued into the Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China. Regarding the reason for the emergence of the stand-up collar, there are conclusions in the academic world. Meng Hui in "A Draft on the History of Women's Clothing in the Central Plains" believed that: "In the middle and late Ming Dynasty, the taboo concept of the human body was intensified to an extreme, which of course reflected the increasingly stringent chastity concept of the Ming Dynasty. The significance of clothing at this time became to cover and erase the body as much as possible. Buttoning up the neckline certainly covered the chest more than the overlap formed by the wrap lapel. However, the people of the Ming were still dissatisfied, so the stand-up collar appeared." [2] In short, the strict chastity concept led to the emergence of the stand-up collar to better cover women's chests. Chen Fang, in "Research on Double Buttons on Ming Dynasty Women's Clothing", pointed out that the emergence and popularity of the stand-up collar "might be to provide a good display space for gold (jade) buttons." [3] Combining the prosperous commodity economy and the decadent customs of Late Ming, she pointed out that "for moral reasons of chastity, women wrapped their necks, which should not be the reason for the popularity of the stand-up collar" [3]. Du Jingfang in "Research on the Shape and Culture of Traditional Chinese Collars" believed that "the stand-up collar in the Ming Dynasty developed from the crossover collar" [4] and inferred from the collar decorations of the escorts in

"Emperor Xianzong's Lantern Festival Enjoyment Painting" that the "crossover collar" plus "button" combination was the bud of the stand-up collar. Wei Tiantian's "Research on the Stand-Up Collar Dress of Han Women in the Ming Dynasty" and Wang Jiaqi's "Research on Metal Button Styles in Ming Dynasty Women's Clothing" both believed that the reasons for the appearance of the stand-up collar, in addition to the aforementioned "chastity view" and "metal button" reasons, were also related to the climate of the Little Ice Age [5].

The popularity and change of clothing are of concern in the study of fashion history. There are many places to learn from past research conclusions and methods. However, past fashion research has overly pursued the "socio-cultural nature" of clothing. As a result, there are inevitably shortcomings in such studies, resulting in a lack of evidence. In view of this, the author hopes to rethink the changes in clothing from the perspective of daily life, based on the observation of the body, taking the stand-up collar as an example, for further verification, seeking guidance from experts.

2. The Culture and Influence of Buttons"

Regarding the use of buttons in clothing, it is generally believed that they were introduced into the Central Plains along with "Hu clothing" during the Sui and Tang dynasties. They usually appeared on the collar side of men's round-collar robes, serving the function of closing the front (see Figure 1). This buttoning method is obviously different from the traditional Central Plains way of using ties. Although ties can connect the two ends that need to be linked, their slippery silk material does not hold as securely as buttons. Subsequently, buttons gradually became integrated into Chinese attire, especially during the Yuan dynasty when they were "transplanted onto Han costumes adopted by Mongolian women"[6]. Mr. Meng Hui cited a bustier (see Figure 2) unearthed from a Yuan tomb in Zhang County, Gansu, suggesting that Central Plains women initially accepted buttons through undergarments. This gave buttons a gender connotation, further arguing that the pairing of stand-up collars and buttons in the Ming Dynasty symbolized the taboo and oppression of the female body. The author believes that the use of buttons in female clothing, especially undergarments, is primarily due to the fact that buttons provide a more secure closure. The prominence of a woman's chest requires external support, and buttons can better meet the body's demands for suitability. This doesn't necessarily imply a constraint on the female body but rather an adaptation to the body's needs. In the garments of women unearthed from the middle and late Ming period, there are both delicate silk buttons and metal ones. Material-wise, metal buttons are clearly more precious. A dragon robe found in the tomb of Zhu Tan in Ming's Lu Huang has 11 pairs of gold buttons on the right lapel, indicating that metal buttons were already used in the attire of royal nobles in the early Ming Dynasty. Additionally, in the Ming tomb of Mr. and Mrs. Liu Xiang in Taizhou, Jiangsu, a satin-lined jacket was discovered with no collar and a round neckline, featuring brass metal buttons and silk ties connecting the lapel. In garments from the Wanli period, there is a common use of more exquisite metal buttons inlaid with gemstones. This suggests that collar buttons serve two purposes: one is to fit the garment more closely around the neck (closure function), and the second is that over time, refined buttons gradually became important neck accessories.

Professor Chen Fang has delved deeply into the buttons of the Ming Dynasty. The author agrees that just like jewelry, buttons have become a luxurious indicator of social status. However, it cannot be concluded that the emergence of stand-up collars was solely to provide space for showcasing buttons. This is because if the collar was introduced just for the sake of buttons, the round collar or high cross-collar structures would suffice, making the stand-up collar unnecessary. Looking at the evolution of ancient Chinese clothing, while aspects like color,

pattern, material, size, length, and quantity can be arbitrarily ranked in importance, the basic structural changes in clothing are primarily to accommodate the body and behavioral needs.

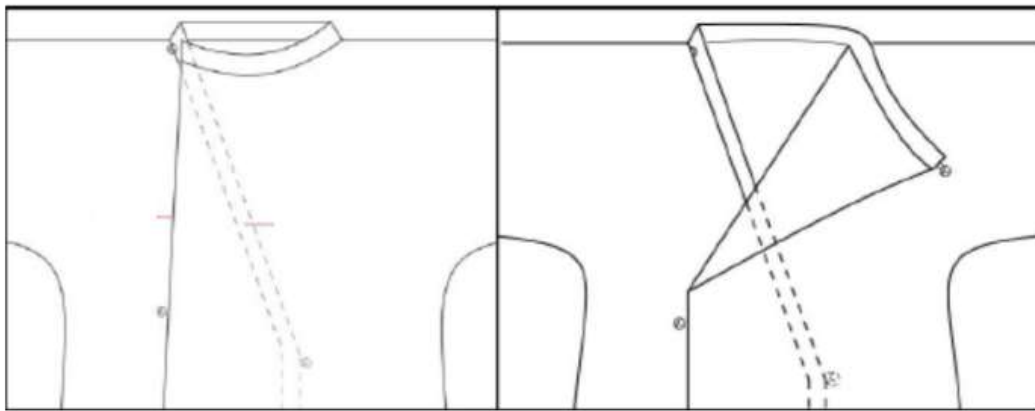


Figure 1. Closure method of men's round-collar robe



Figure 2. Bustier (unearthed from a Yuan tomb in Zhang County, Gansu)

3. The Origin and Cultural Evolution of the Stand-up Collar

Reconsidering the reason for the emergence of the Mandarin collar, I believe its appearance is mainly related to warmth. The pairing of the "protective collar" on the crossover collar with buttons constituted the rudimentary form of the Mandarin collar.

For climatologists, the "Little Ice Age" is "a period when the global temperature was generally lower" [7]. According to the conclusions of Bradley and Jones, "In the Northern Hemisphere, the coldest interval started from around 1570 and ended around 1730, with almost the entire 19th century also in a cold state." [8] Based on this timeframe, it aligns perfectly with the Wanli era (Emperor Ming Shenzong ascended the throne in 1572) to the late Qing Dynasty, what scholars refer to as the "Ming-Qing Little Ice Age." The colder temperatures necessitated the need for

greater warmth, and the exposed neck needed to be wrapped more tightly. In the "Ming Xianzong Lantern Festival Picture," we can see that the collar of the attendant's clothing is a high crossover collar with a white protective collar. A button is used near the chin on the protective collar. This image conveys several important messages: the Lantern Festival in northern winter is relatively cold, the crossover collar is very high to protect the neck, and the more sturdy button is used on the white protective collar. From the picture, this button seems to be a linear button woven with golden threads, consistent with the character's status. (See Figure 3).



Figure 3. Attire of court ladies in the "Ming Xianzong Lantern Festival Picture"

As for the records of protective collars, Li Xiu in "Random Notes of Jie An Old Man" recorded, "Palace maids all use paper to make protective collars, changed daily to maintain cleanliness"[8]. Liu Ruoyu in "Notes While Drinking" mentioned: "The white collar is made of starched cloth, like a jade ring on the neck but missing its front, and is replaced when slightly soiled. Only those who have entered the imperial city dare to use it"[9]. Whether made of paper or starched cloth, the purpose of the protective collar is to add an extra layer on the crossover collar to prevent staining and wear. "Only those who have entered the imperial city dare to use it" implies that only those who have had access to the palace would be so meticulous. As Ye Mengzhu described in "Ye's Life Stories," "Respectable families, aiming for purity, would protect their collars with white silk or satin"[10].

As time passed, based on the analysis of women's unearthed clothing from the Wanli period, the Mandarin collar had basically taken shape by this time. I agree with Du Jingfang's view that the white protective collar section, cut at a right angle near the collarbone and throat, and then aligned and buttoned up, became the Ming Dynasty Mandarin collar[11].

The collar is an essential part of clothing. In visual imagery, the collar is closest to the head, and its changes highlight the lines of the face and neck. After the emergence of the Mandarin collar,

combined with the broad-fronted robe and crossover robe, it became the main popular style for women's clothing in the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty. (See Figures 4 & 5).

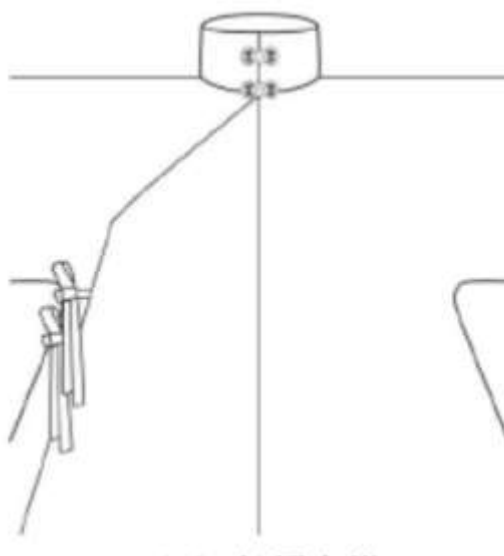


Figure 4. Combination of the broad-fronted robe, Mandarin collar, and buttons

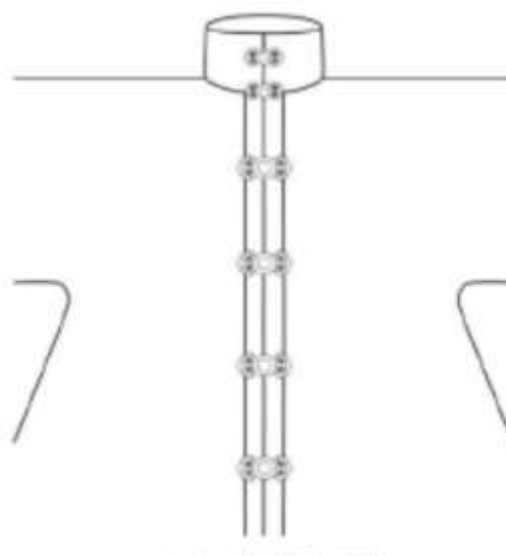


Figure 5. Combination of the crossover robe, Mandarin collar, and buttons

In conclusion, the emergence and popularization timeline of the Mandarin collar during the mid-to-late Ming period is clear. Structurally, the Mandarin collar evolved from the protective collar on the crossover collar. The addition of buttons to the protective collar was to better fit the neck, especially to fulfill the practical function of warmth. Subsequent aesthetic involvement greatly promoted the development of the Mandarin collar, especially the decoration of luxurious metal buttons. In this process, court women undoubtedly played a driving role. From empresses and noble women to businesswomen and concubines, all emulated this new trend. The popularity of the Mandarin collar in women's clothing continued into the Qing Dynasty, with men's clothing in the Qing Dynasty also being greatly influenced.

4. Conclusion

Traditional costume history research often adopts the "historical analysis through objects" approach. Using the stand-up collar discussed in this article as an example, scholars tend to link this change to the prevailing ideologies (such as taboos on the human body) and social customs (like the use of metal buttons), analyzing the reasons for the evolution of clothing from these perspectives. Admittedly, these are valid research angles, but clothing has its unique nature, that is, its relation to the physical body. In the past, there was no designated role as a "designer"; garment-making was entirely in the hands of craftsmen and tailors, who were essentially the earliest fashion designers. They needed to consider the cut, style, technique, color, etc., of the clothing. Beyond that, the most crucial aspect was "tailoring to the individual." Tailoring embodies two principles: first, to fit the human body perfectly, and second, to meet the body's practical needs. This emphasis on the human body contrasts with the contemporary neglect of the body in traditional costume history research. Through the medium of clothing, the author of this paper aims to offer a brief exploration, hoping to pave a new path in the study of costume history.

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