

Women in Ancient China

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Women's roles in family and society

Ancient Chinese women were subordinate to men for most of their lives. First she would obey her father, and after marriage she answered to her husband. According to K'ung Fu-tze, also known as Confucius, a woman's duty was to look after her husband, sons and the other men in her life. As such, her greatest duty was to have a son. That didn't mean that she shouldn't be respected: her role as mother and mother-in-law was very important and she should be honoured by her offspring. In their old age, women were often respected by their families as the oldest living member, especially if they survived their husbands.

Marriage was an arranged affair that was set up in such a way that both families would profit from the union. The bride's family would provide her with a dowry. Because of this, the father of the bride always had the last say in who his daughter married; the girl in question wouldn't have any input in this, regardless of whether she was a noble or a peasant girl.

Women could be sold by their male relatives for a variety of reasons, though this usually happened in the lower classes. If there had been a bad harvest, a peasant could sell his daughter to get the rest of the family through the winter. It was also possible for a father to sell his youngest daughter after marrying off her other sisters; multiple dowries could, in the case of the working class, get rather expensive or unaffordable. The women sold this way would usually end up in brothels.

Education and occupation

Because of the subservience of women, education was mostly out of the question. Daughters of nobles could be literate, but this was, especially in early Imperial China, more an exception than a rule. Their occupations were centred around home and hearth: from cooking and cleaning to nurturing the children. Weaving, spinning and sewing were common, home-based occupations for women of the working class. Their husbands would sell the products as additional income for the household. Some farmer's wives helped their spouses on the fields.

There were of course, less savoury professions such as prostitution. The bulk of these girls were your regular, run-of-the-mill prostitutes who had to give their bodies to whoever paid the price. Talented girls could end up becoming a courtesan, a Yiji. As a Yiji, the woman would not often engage in sex trade, but was instead a songstress, poetess, dancer and companion in one. Rich and influential men often had favourite courtesans, and sometimes such a man would buy the lady in question free and take her as concubine or even a wife (in ancient China, men of standing were allowed to have more wives).

Women's dress and makeup

The prevalent mode of clothing for millennia was the Hanfu, or silk robe, in use for both men and women alike, but with some difference in composition of garments for each

gender. Each dynasty would develop its own style of Hanfu. For women, a Hanfu was made up out of a qun or qang, a skirt; yi, an open cross-collar garment; ru, an open cross-collar shirt; and the shan, an open cross-collar jacket that was worn over the yi. There were women-specific styles as well, such as the quju version of the shenyi, which was a mode of dress in use mostly in the pre-Shang periods (before the second millennium B.C.). The quju had wider sleeves than the male zhiju, a longer, pointed lapel, and had a curved hem.

The Hanfus of the upper class could be as elaborate as their rank in society allowed, with ornaments of jade or precious metal hanging from the sashes of the garment. Working class women wore less elaborate versions of the Hanfu, or, if they were doing manual labour, might have preferred loose trousers and simple open cross-collar jackets. These women aren't likely to have worn makeup, though it's not possible to say for certain. The makeup trends that were in vogue among daughters and wives of the nobility were mostly focussed on the eyebrows: there are quite a few legends wherein the Emperor or another man of high standing falls in love with a lady because of her elegant eyebrows.

Apart from painstakingly painting their eyebrows in blueish black (a practice that had many different styles, each with its own name), Chinese women applied foundation for a smooth, pale look and reddened their lips and their cheeks. Dimples were enhanced or painted on, and often a flower ornament was painted on the forehead, between the eyebrows. Legend goes that a princess once fell asleep under a cherry tree, and when she woke up a blossom had fallen on her forehead. The princess and the ladies of the court were so taken by this, that they started painting the flower patterns on their skin.

That most infamous beauty practice of China, foot binding or chanzu, had not yet gained widespread use in antiquity. The exact origins are unknown, but it is thought that it originated with the dancers of the early Song dynasty, around 960 A.D.