The Sinicization of Manchu Women in the Qing Dynasty: Evaluating from Marriage Custom, Chaste Widow, and Manchu Clothing

Jiaheng Liu, University of Texas

Marriage Custom: From Polygamy Levirate Marriage to Monogamy and Multiple Concubines

Long before the Qing Dynasty's establishment, many notable distinctions existed in marriage customs between the Jurchens and the Han Chinese. Confucian norms on marriage markedly contrasted with the moral standards of the Jurchens and many other Inner Asian ethnic groups. One of the most significant differences between Manchu and Han marriage customs lies in Levirate Marriage (Ch. *Shouji hunyin*).

During the reign of Nurhaci, the founder of the Later Jin dynasty—predecessor to the Qing Empire—and the ruler who unified the scattered Jurchen (Manchu) tribes, levirate marriage was common within Jurchen martial customs. Among Nurhaci's wives, Fucha Gundai stood out as she was previously married to Nurhaci's deceased cousin (Ding, 1999). Following the cousin's death, Nurhaci accepted Gundai into his family as one of his wives (Ding, 1999). In Han Chinese philosophy, particularly the neo-Confucian values that were popular in the Ming Dynasty, the remarriage of widows was absolutely discouraged (Waltner, 1981). The saint of neo-Confucianism, Zhu Xi, believed that: "It is a small matter to starve to death, but a large matter to lose one's virtue" (Waltner, 1981). Throughout nearly all Chinese dynasties, the Court actively championed the notion of women's virtues, emphasizing ideals such as chastity and widowhood as exemplary models (Ge, 2013).

However, during the 16th century in Manchuria, levirate marriage was morally permitted and perceived as advantageous for societal progress. In the early years, when the Jurchen tribes were divided and involved in raiding each other, marrying the daughter of another tribal chief or the daughter of a Mongolian tribal leader was equivalent to establishing an alliance with an outside tribe (Ding, 1999). Among the common people, a man having more wives meant more working members in the family. Historical records in Ningguta, Manchuria, describe Jurchen women participating in prolonged periods of handling grain at home, sometimes spanning several days and nights (Wu, 1721). Other male family members even required some young women to

participate in hunting expeditions alongside men (Ding, 1999). Women's contribution and hard work and contributions in Jurchen society made men to consider taking multiple wives to work together.

The concept of marriage in Jurchen society gradually changed during frequent cultural communication with the Han Chinese. It can be seen from a dialogue file between Koreans and Jurchens that some Jurchens who understood Han culture had already begun to feel ashamed of levirate marriages before the Qing Dynasty. When the Korean asks the Jurchen: "If one of your brothers dies first, will you marry his wife?" The Jurchens replies: "I can marry my brother's wife if she is beautiful and rich." However, another Jurchen quickly intervened and argued: "How can such a notion be said! Why would the noble follow such a practice" (Sang, 2002). This appears to be a matter to the lower ranks." Not all Manchus agreed with levirate marriage before they ruled China.

The Qing Court implemented a decree in 1636 prohibiting levirate marriages. Although Hong Taiji, the first emperor of the Qing Empire, banned levirate marriage in 1631, however, in 1634, after defeating Ligdan Khan, a powerful Chahar Mongolian leader and Hong Taiji's greatest enemy from the Mongolian grassland, he married Ligdan Khan's wife for political reasons (Liang & Janggiya, 1783). After 1636, the custom of appointing a queen (Ch. *Huanghou*) among the emperor's women began to spread in the royal family (Ding, 1999). Starting from the Qing Dynasty, the Manchu society began to change from polygamy to "monogamy and multiple concubines (Ch. *Yifu Duoqi Duoqie*)". Throughout this transition, Manchu women's marriage practice changed from the traditional Jurchen or Inner Asian levirate marriage, and polygamous customs to the Han Chinese tradition of "monogamy and multiple concubines." The process of Sinicization in marriage was primarily pushed by political elites and legal regulations, rather than being driven by the initiatives of Manchu women themselves. In the royal family, since the Kangxi Dynasty, the status relationship between the queen and other concubines has became very clear like all other Chinese dynasties, until the collapse of the empire (Ding, 1999).

Penetration of Confucian Philosophy: The Chaste of Manchu Widows

As the Manchus assumed governance in China, many Chinese scholars and literati perceived Manchus as uncultured barbarians. They were unwilling to cooperate with the Qing Court in governing the country. In Chinese traditions, a dynasty lacking moral excellence "will no longer be Chinese, but barbarian" (Elvin, 1984). The Manchu conquerors experienced a palpable sense of insecurity after entering the Forbidden City. The Manchus wished to be seen as legitimate rulers who had won the Mandate of Heaven to rule China and not just as another pack of uncivilized barbarian interlopers (Mann, 1997). Manchu elites tried to sponsor many Han

traditions to secure support from Han Chinese for their governance. The promotion and commendation of widow chastity was one of the strategies.

In 1644, Emperor Shunzhi issued an edict stating that the county government was encouraged and should erect memorial arches for chaste women to commemorate their moral integrity. The commendation for women's chastity was also called the *jingbiao*. According to the description of levirate marriage in the previous section, women in Jurchen society did not have to keep chastity for their dead husbands. However, the Court first adopted the jingbiao system to recognize the moral integrity of Manchu widows in 1651 (Elliott, 1999). Approving jingbiao for Manchu women could be perceived as another way for the Qing to reinforce their dedication to Confucian principles and claim their legitimacy as rulers of the Chinese empire (Elliott, 1999).

The chaste women who were rewarded during the Shunzhi period did not necessarily persist in practice chastity because they believed in the teaching of Confucianism. Many awarded chaste Manchu women, especially those who committed suicide, were following a custom that the Jurchens had in Manchuria, called "following-in-death" (Elliott, 1999). These women who committed suicide usually followed the death of their husbands. Most were women of lower status in elite or political families (Hummel, 1944). However, an undeniable trend persists: as the Court continued to advocate for the virtues of chaste women, an increasing number of Manchu women adopted this chaste lifestyle. Starting from the Shunzhi Dynasty, the proportion of chaste widows increased in every dynasty (Elliott, 1999).

During the Yongzheng period, the fourth Manchu emperor emphasized the practice of honoring chaste widows within the Eight Banners system, the fundamental organizational structure of Manchu society. The emperor ordered to construct halls near the Eight Banners settlement to commemorate the virtue of chaste widows. The Qianlong emperor appears to have adopted a more "Chinese" attitude to widow chasity than his father. In an edict of 1762, "unmarried maidens who die of sickness in the homes of their betrothed while preserving their chastity demonstrate a pure and sympathetic will; they shall, regardless of their age, have their cases investigated by the banner and reported to the board for jingbiao nomination in order to console their loyal spirits."

The support of the Imperial Court to the chaste widows resulted in an increased number of Manchu women embracing and adhering to this concept. The number of chaste Manchu widows increased exponentially in the eighteenth century during the reign of Qianlong. The percentage of total number of chaste widows in Qianlong period came to 100 percent among all Eight Banners widows (Elliott, 1999). This is a miracle,

especially since no law in the Court restrict Banner women from remarry.

Over Manchus' century-long rule in China, the Manchus have witnessed a gradual alikeness in their economic, social status, and ideologies with the Han Chinese. The acceptance of Confucian teachings in the moral standard of widows among Manchu women shows how Manchu women were experienced Sinicization and adopted Han culture advocated by the imperial court. The concept of the chaste widow, previously unknown to the Manchus, was upheld by Manchu women.

Clothing Customs: The Manchu Clothing and Hanfu

The clothing culture of Manchu people, before Manchus entered the Shanhai Pass, contradicted and collided with the clothing culture of the Han Chinese due to their cultural and aesthetic concepts (Su, 2019). The design of Manchu clothing, also known as *Qizhuang* was influenced by Manchuria's economic system, production practices, lifestyle preferences, and geographical climate. The Manchu people originally inhabited northeastern China, Manchuria, which was characterized by an exceedingly cold climate. In order to deal with the harsh weather, Manchus' clothing consisted primarily of robes, serving as a pragmatic means to keep warm body temperature (Wen & Song, 2019).

The Manchu women wore the nomadic horseman's boots, trousers, and functional riding coats. Meanwhile, in the late Ming, Han Chinese clothing was unique in the ample, flowing robes and slippers with upturned toes (Rawski, 1998). In contrast to the Hanfu, Manchu clothing reflected simplicity in its design, especially suitable for the wild nomadic lifestyle (Song, 2023). Manchu clothing allowed greater ease of movement while the Han Chinese wide and long-sleeved robes limited movement.

The Manchus have historically been adamant about preserving their unique cultural identity, often called "Manchuness." However, with the changes in political dominance and advancements in overall living standards, there has been a clear process of Sinification within Manchus' clothing, especially for the Manchu women. After the Manchus seized power in China, notable integration of Han cultural elements became evident with the pattern of Manchu clothing, such as the auspicious symbols of "fortune and longevity," depicted in Han Chinese characters, incorporated into the design motifs of Manchu women's cloth (Song, 2023).

In the design of Manchu clothing, wide robe sleeves, typical features in the Hanfu, were adopted in the informal daily outfits of the Manchu women (Mao, 2007). Manchu women assimilated facets of Han culture and integrated them into their daily routines. Among city-dwelling Manchu women, a significant change in lifestyle from their Manchurian ancestors is evident. Transitioning from nomadic and fishing traditions to a sedentary comfort life, these Manchu women naturally adapt their attire to suit

the demands of the new settled life like Han Chinese women.

As documented in the imperial court archives, the Sinification of Manchu women's attire extended even to the royal family. After Nurhaci's reign, emperor's wife and concubines adopted a clothing aesthetic marked by loose, elongated robes, prioritizing both insulation and comfort (Du, 2003). Later on, the popularity of broad robe sleeves, a typical feature in traditional Han Chinese clothing, gained favor among emperor's women (Du, 2003). The Sinicized Manchu clothing becoming a prevalent choice for both ceremonial and everyday wear even until the fall of the Qing Dynasty (Major & Steele).

Although the Qing Court enforced stringent clothing regulations for its people, the constraints on women were relatively more lenient (Su, 2019). Han women retained the freedom to wear *Hanfu* from the Ming Dynasty. Manchu women and other Banner women were required to wear Manchu dress as prescribed by the Court (Rawski, 1998). However, the long-term cultural interaction between the Manchus and Han eventually caused certain Manchu women to disregard the Court's mandates and adopt Han costumes. Instances of this defiance came to light during the regular Imperial Bride-shows in the Forbidden City. During the Qianlong reign, some Banner women transgressed the ban on wearing Han costumes and Chinese pieces of jewelry in Bride-show (*xuanxiunv*) (Vollmer, 2002). The Qianlong emperor worried that the customs of the Manchu people would be diluted by the Han Chinese ways. In 1759, he commissioned a new dress code called the "Illustration of Imperial Ritual Paraphernalia," to prevent Manchu women from wearing Han Chinese clothing (Valery, 2007). The new dress code included a long segment specifying the clothing worn by noblemen and their consorts, Manchu officials, as well as their wives and daughters (Valery, 2007).

While the Qing court actively promoted Manchu clothing within the Banner system, the attraction of Han cultural symbols and the need for city living gradually led Manchu women to shift their clothing style. The evolution leaned to a more Chinese-inspired fashion, culminating in a period during the mid-Qing when Manchu women started adopting Han women's clothing directly.

Conclusion

Marriage customs, the concept of chaste widows, and the Manchu clothing in the lives of Manchu women all underwent Sinicization. Decisions made in the male-dominated political arena influenced the marriage custom and the concept of chastity. Meanwhile, the teachings of Confucianism played a key role in changing Manchu women's marital and moral behavior during the early-mid Qing Dynasty. Confucianism, the culture that the Chinese dynasties have always respected and promoted politically, was also accepted by the Manchus from Northeast China in the Qing Dynasty. The evolution of clothing among Manchu women reflects a sense of self-determination. The change in clothing is a direct

consequence of the transformations in production methods, lifestyle, and aesthetic sensibilities among Manchu women.

The Sinicization of Manchu women reveals how Han culture allowed a foreign minority to accept the traditions of Han Chinese culture. This conclusion may also explain how China today maintains a multi-ethnic demography.

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