

# The Cultural Meaning of Wedding Attire in the Northern Song Dynasty

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**Abstract:** The Northern Song Dynasty was an important period of change in the development of ancient Chinese clothing culture. Wedding attire, as a core part of ritual dress, not only showed the continuation and innovation of clothing styles but also reflected the social structure, ethical views, economic level, and aesthetic tastes of its time. This paper studies the wedding attire of the Northern Song Dynasty. Using historical records like "The Eastern Capital: A Dream of Splendor" and "The History of Song: Treatise on Carriages and Dress," along with archaeological finds, it looks at three aspects: clothing styles, materials and techniques, and decorative elements. It explains the hierarchy system, Confucian ethics, commodity economy, and aesthetic ideas behind the attire. The paper shows how wedding attire, as a cultural object, reflected social changes and new ways of thinking under the Northern Song policy of "prioritizing civil over military affairs." This provides a new view for understanding Northern Song society and culture.

**Keywords:** Northern song dynasty; Wedding attire; Cultural meaning; Hierarchy system; Confucian ethics; Commodity economy

DOI: 10.62639/sspjiss25.20250212

## 1. Introduction

Clothing, the first among "clothing, food, shelter, and transportation," is not just a material object for covering the body and keeping warm, but also a direct reflection of society and culture. Wedding attire, as the core of ritual dress for major life events, carries ideas about marriage ethics, family values, and social rules. It is a concentrated expression of the cultural spirit of a specific time. The Northern Song Dynasty was a period of change in ancient Chinese society. It ended the division of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms and established the basic state policy of "prioritizing civil over military affairs." Confucian thought saw a revival and became more systematic. The commodity economy grew greatly, and the urban commoner class rose. These social changes deeply influenced people's status and way of life. Connecting clothing with the Northern Song's hierarchy system, Confucian ethics, and commodity economy helps shape our understanding of its unique wedding attire culture and explore its deeper cultural meaning.

## 2. Basic Styles and Class Differences in Northern Song Wedding Attire

### (1) Core clothing styles

Based on the clothing traditions of the Tang Dynasty, Northern Song wedding attire developed its own unique system of styles. The core set usually included the "beizi + moxiong + long skirt," accessorized with a xiapei and headdress. The overall style was formal and elegant, being both practical and ritualistic.

### 1) Main wedding garments: beizi and skirts

The beizi was the most representative clothing item of the Northern Song and a core part of wedding attire.  
(Manuscript NO.: JISS-25-12-62002)

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According to "The Eastern Capital: A Dream of Splendor-Marrying a Wife"; "On the wedding day, the groom's family sent a carriage or decorated sedan to fetch the bride... when the bride came out of her room, she sat in the carriage, wearing a red head-cover (gaitou)..." The "gaitou" was an important accessory, while the main wedding dress was often the beizi. The Northern Song beizi had a straight collar and front opening, with slits under the arms. Its length reached the knees or ankles. It came in narrow and wide sleeves. Nobles often wore beizi with wide sleeves to show dignity, while commoners wore narrow sleeves for easier movement. The primary color for the beizi was bright red, symbolizing joy and good fortune. "The History of Song: Treatise on Carriages and Dress" states: "For women's clothing, only wedding and sacrificial attire allow xiapei and headdresses; the rest are restricted." This clearly allowed wearing xiapei and headdresses for weddings, free from the color restrictions of everyday clothing, making red the main color for wedding dresses.

Besides the beizi, the long skirt was also an important part of the wedding dress. Noble families used high-quality fabrics like brocade and satin for their long skirts, often embroidered with patterns like dragons, phoenixes, or peonies. Commoners mostly wore plain long skirts or skirts with simple embroidery only at the hem.

## **2) Ritual accessories: xiapei and headdress**

The xiapei was a symbolic ritual accessory in Northern Song wedding attire. It was originally for court ladies but later became common in folk weddings. According to "Record of the Millet Dream · Marriage": "Wealthy families, when preparing gifts for their daughter's marriage, might also borrow gold and silver jewelry, clothes, and xiapei." The xiapei was a long, narrow colored band, embroidered at both ends. It was worn draped over the shoulders, passing under the arms, and tied at the waist. For nobles, the xiapei was often made of brocade or satin, embroidered with auspicious patterns like "dragon and phoenix" or "harmonious phoenixes," and edged with jewels. Commoners' xiapei were mostly made of plain silk gauze, embroidered with simple floral patterns.

The headdress was an important head ornament for weddings. It included the phoenix crown and ordinary headdresses. The phoenix crown was originally the formal crown for empresses and imperial consorts. During the Northern Song, it gradually became the special headdress for noble weddings. "The History of Song: Treatise on Carriages and Dress" records the formal dress of empresses and consorts. The phoenix crown for noble weddings was lavishly decorated, with a gold or silver frame, inlaid with pearls and gems, and carved with shapes of dragons, phoenixes, and pearl flowers. Commoners usually wore simpler headdresses, made of silver with a few pearls or jade, or simply adorned with silk flowers, gold, or silver hairpins.

## **(2) Class distinctions: the divide in attire between nobility and commoners**

Northern Song society had a strict hierarchy. Clothing, as an important tool for "displaying status and distinguishing rank," showed clear class differences in wedding attire, mainly seen in the materials, craftsmanship, and decorations used.

### **1) Differences in materials**

Noble wedding attire often used high-quality silks like brocade (jin), satin (duan), damask (ling), and gauze (luo). Some garments even used imported fabrics, such as Central Asian brocades or Persian silks. Excavations from the Huang Sheng Tomb in Fuzhou, containing noble clothing from the Northern Song, revealed large amounts of high-end materials like gold-woven brocade and patterned gauze. One beizi jacket embroidered with peony patterns used the complex "kesi" (cut silk) technique, demonstrating exquisite and costly production. In contrast, commoner wedding attire typically used simpler silks like plain damask or coarse gauze. Some poorer families even used hemp cloth. As recorded in "The Eastern Capital: A Dream of Splendor · Folk Customs": "Poorer families could also call for wine at a tavern or order tea and food to enjoy them. For

wedding ceremonies, even the poor would not be too casual, but it was usually just a jacket, skirt, and cloth coverings."

## **2) Differences in craftsmanship**

The craftsmanship for noble wedding attire was extremely complex, employing high-end techniques like embroidery, kesi, and gold-weaving. Embroidery, primarily in the Shu and Su styles, featured delicate stitches and exquisite patterns such as dragons, phoenixes, peonies, and mandarin ducks, all carrying auspicious meanings. The kesi technique, renowned as the "sage of weaving," was time-consuming and labor-intensive, reserved only for noble attire. Gold-weaving involved threading gold into the fabric, giving the clothing a splendid, golden effect. The craftsmanship for commoner wedding attire was relatively simple, mostly using basic techniques like plain embroidery or cross-stitch, with patterns consisting of simple flowers or geometric shapes.

## **3) Differences in decoration**

Noble wedding attire was extremely ornate. Beyond the xiapei and phoenix crown, they also wore gold and silver jewelry, pearls, and gems. For example, the dragon and phoenix designs on headdresses, the jewel inlays on xiapei, and the gold-woven patterns on dresses all highlighted noble status. Decorations on commoner wedding attire were comparatively plain. Their jewelry was mostly silver or copper, inlaid with few pearls or jade. Decorations on clothes were primarily embroidery, with simple patterns and limited colors.

## **3. Materials, Craftsmanship, and Commodity Economy Characteristics of Northern Song Wedding Attire**

### **(1) Materials: the prosperity of the silk industry and its material basis**

The Northern Song commodity economy was exceptionally prosperous. The silk industry, as a core sector of handicrafts, developed significantly, providing a wide range of material choices for wedding attire. According to "The History of Song: Treatise on Finance and Economics," there were many grades of silk products. The variety of silk types meant wedding attire materials became diverse.

High-quality silks like brocade and damask used in noble wedding attire represented the peak of the Northern Song silk industry. Materials like plain damask and coarse gauze used by commoners, while simpler in craftsmanship, reflected the widespread availability of silk goods among the populace. Furthermore, the silk industry was highly commercialized. Silks circulated through markets, making it possible for commoners to purchase wedding attire. "The Eastern Capital: A Dream of Splendor-Streets and Lanes of the Eastern Corner" records a bustling market for gold, silver, and silks, where transactions could involve huge sums. This market prosperity meant acquiring wedding attire was no longer limited to the nobility; commoners could also obtain relatively decent wedding clothes.

### **(2) Craftsmanship: progress in handicrafts and aesthetic pursuits**

Advances in Northern Song handicraft technology drove innovation in wedding attire craftsmanship. The widespread use of techniques like embroidery, kesi, and gold-weaving not only raised production standards but also reflected the aesthetic pursuits of Northern Song society.

Embroidery was one of the most common techniques for wedding attire, divided into court embroidery and folk embroidery. Court embroidery, managed by official workshops, was exquisite and followed strict patterns, mainly for noble wedding clothes. Folk embroidery, made by local artisans, was more flexible and diverse in design, often used for commoners' wedding attire. Northern Song embroidery utilized various

stitches. Among them, gold-wrapped embroidery involved coiling gold thread on the fabric to create raised patterns, often used on accessories like xiapei and headdresses to show splendor.

The kesi technique peaked during the Northern Song. Its production process was complex, requiring the warp threads to be fixed on the loom while the weft threads were woven in sections according to the pattern, creating the characteristic "continuous warp, broken weft" effect. Kesi clothing was brightly colored with realistic patterns and was highly valued for noble wedding attire. The kesi beizi from the Huang Sheng Tomb in Fuzhou, with its peony pattern, rich colors, and superb craftsmanship, demonstrates the high skill level of Northern Song kesi.

Gold-weaving was an innovation in Northern Song clothing craftsmanship. The application of gold-weaving made wedding attire more festive and magnificent, fitting the ceremonial atmosphere of weddings, while also reflecting the society's pursuit of wealth and status.

### **(3) Commercialization: the rise of the commoner class and the clothing consumer market**

The rise of the commoner class and prosperous urban economy in the Northern Song created a large consumer market for clothing. Wedding attire, as an important consumer category, showed clear signs of commercialization. According to "The Eastern Capital: A Dream of Splendor·Folk Customs," in cities like the capital Bianjing (modern Kaifeng) and Lin'an (modern Hangzhou), there were shops specializing in wedding attire. These shops not only sold ready-made wedding clothes but also offered custom services, creating attire based on the customer's class and needs, thus satisfying different consumers.

Furthermore, a clothing rental industry emerged during this period. As noted in "Record of the Millet Dream·Marriage," commoner families could access high-end wedding attire through rental services. The commercialization of wedding attire not only reflected the prosperity of the Northern Song commodity economy but also highlighted the consumption demands and aesthetic pursuits of the commoner class, promoting the spread and development of clothing culture.

## **4. The Cultural Meaning Carried by Northern Song Wedding Attire**

### **(1) A direct reflection of the hierarchy system: attire and social order**

The Northern Song Dynasty placed great importance on "rule by rites" (lizhi). Clothing, as a key vehicle for these "rites," was assigned clear hierarchical attributes. Through differences in materials, craftsmanship, and decoration, wedding attire directly reflected the social hierarchy of the Northern Song period.

According to "The History of Song: Treatise on Carriages and Dress," the Northern Song rulers established dress codes to regulate the clothing of different social strata. Nobles were permitted to wear phoenix crowns (fengguan) and xiapei, using high-quality materials like brocade and kesi, adorned with patterns like dragons, phoenixes, and jewels. Commoners, however, were forbidden from using dragon and phoenix patterns; their materials were mostly plain damask or coarse gauze, with simple decorations. This distinction was, in essence, a manifestation of the Northern Song's hierarchical system, which emphasized separation between noble and base, and a strict order of precedence. Clothing became an important marker of social class, thereby upholding the feudal ruling order.

### **(2) The deep influence of Confucian ethics: marriage and family ideals**

The Northern Song was a period of Confucian revival. Although the Neo-Confucianism of Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi was not yet fully dominant, ethical concepts like "preserving heavenly principle and eliminating human desires" were gradually influencing social life. As a key part of marriage rituals, wedding attire deeply

embodied Confucian marital ethics and family values.

### **1) Patrilineal concepts and family continuity**

Confucianism emphasized that "among the three forms of unfilial conduct, having no descendants is the worst." The core purpose of marriage was to continue the family line. The dragon and phoenix patterns in Northern Song wedding attire symbolized imperial authority and nobility, but also represented the ideal match between husband and wife and the hope for offspring. Peony patterns symbolized wealth and nobility, implying the bride would bring prosperity to the family. Mandarin duck patterns symbolized conjugal affection and a lasting union. These designs were not just aesthetic decorations; they expressed Confucian patrilineal ideals, tightly linking marriage to family continuity.

### **2) The three obediences and four virtues and norms for women**

Confucianism stressed the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" for women. The style and wearing conventions of Northern Song wedding attire reflected these moral constraints and behavioral norms. The solemn and elegant nature of the wedding dress required the wearer to maintain dignity and propriety during the ceremony, aligning with the requirement for "womanly appearance" (*furong*). The wearing of accessories like the *xiapei* and headdress symbolized the transition from maiden to wife, meaning she must now take on family responsibilities and adhere to the norms of "womanly virtue" (*fude*) and "womanly work" (*fugong*). Furthermore, the red head-cover (*gaitou*) used in the wedding symbolized "chastity," reflecting the Confucian emphasis on virtue. "The Eastern Capital: A Dream of Splendor · Marrying a Wife" records: "...when the bride came out of her room, she sat in the carriage, wearing a red head-cover (*gaitou*)..." The use of the *gaitou* was not just a ritual custom; it reflected the Confucian ethical demand for women to "seldom leave the home and strictly guard their chastity."

### **(3) The transformation of aesthetic ideals: from openness to restraint**

Compared to the open and bold style of the Tang Dynasty, Northern Song wedding attire displayed a distinctly restrained and elegant character. This reflected a shift in aesthetic ideals during the Northern Song, closely linked to its policy of "prioritizing civil over military affairs" and the revival of Confucian thought.

Tang Dynasty clothing was known for its openness. Wedding dresses often featured low-cut tops and skirts, bright colors, and flamboyant patterns, reflecting the open and inclusive nature of Tang society. After the establishment of the Northern Song, with its "prioritizing civil over military" policy, the scholar-official class rose, and Confucianism revived, emphasizing the "Doctrine of the Mean" and "inner restraint." These ideas profoundly influenced aesthetic tastes.

Furthermore, Tang wedding attire often featured mythical animals like heavenly horses or protective beasts, full of a romantic and bold spirit. In contrast, Northern Song wedding attire patterns mainly depicted real flowers and animals like peonies, lotuses, and mandarin ducks, reflecting a more "pragmatic and restrained" aesthetic preference. This transformation in aesthetics was essentially a reflection of the socio-intellectual culture of the Northern Song, where Confucian "moderation" and "restraint" replaced the "openness" and "boldness" of the Tang, becoming the dominant social aesthetic.

### **(4) Implicit political expression: strengthening imperial power and ritual governance**

The Northern Song rulers highly valued the political function of clothing. They incorporated wedding attire into the system of ritual institutions, using regulations on its form, color, and decoration to strengthen imperial authority and the order of ritual governance. This demonstrates the deep intervention of political in social life.

"The History of Song: Treatise on Carriages and Dress," as an official document on Northern Song dress

codes, clearly stipulated the ranks, forms, and colors for wedding attire. These regulations were not just about clothing; they served to uphold imperial power and the hierarchical system. Through sartorial differences, they highlighted the supreme nature of imperial authority and the inviolability of the hierarchical order.

Simultaneously, elements like dragon and phoenix patterns, the xiapei, and the phoenix crown in Northern Song wedding attire were originally reserved for the imperial family but were gradually extended to the nobility. This process demonstrated the imperial court's strategy of co-opting and controlling the elite, consolidating the feudal order by granting them specific clothing privileges.

## 5. Conclusion

The cultural meaning of Northern Song wedding attire is essentially a reflection of the social transition during the Northern Song Dynasty. It shows the interaction between economic development, intellectual change, and political rule. By studying wedding attire, we can gain a deeper understanding of the underlying structure and cultural spirit of Northern Song society. Furthermore, the cultural traditions carried by this attire, such as the emphasis on marital ethics and the pursuit of auspicious symbolism, had a profound impact on later wedding attire cultures. It became an important part of traditional Chinese culture.

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