

# Research on the Form and Symbolism of the Chinese Wedding Phoenix Crown

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## Abstract

Along with the development of culture, dress of the Chinese people has also evolved over the last several thousand years, transcending its original functions of covering and protecting the body. As a result, it has risen to become a complicated system of symbols full of intricate meanings. According to de Saussure's theory of "signs," signs are represented by the elements signified (meaning) (referent) and signifiant (sound) (exponent). "Phoenix crowns" were the headpieces most highly esteemed by women in ancient China. Actually, the name "phoenix crown" points to the fact that the headpiece is adorned with a phoenix design. The history and symbolism of the phoenix crown's use as a headpiece in Chinese weddings spans 1200 years in all, originating in the Qin Dynasty (241-210 BC) as a phoenix hairpin, evolving into the phoenix crown during the Song Dynasty (960-1276 AD), and continuing through the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1644-1911 AD), and the modern republic. It is not simply an ornamental headpiece, but instead represents the thousands of years of rich inner meaning the Chinese attribute to "dragons" and "phoenixes." This paper depicts the glorious past of phoenix crowns, using the metaphor and metonymy theories of semiology and semantics, and through the cross-verification of literature research, archeological findings and reports, and old Chinese wedding photographs, in order to examine the inherent meanings of the phoenix crown in the Chinese culture.

## Evolution of the Phoenix Design

The evolution of the phoenix design originated from the "totem" worship of nature by man in ancient times. The phoenix image first appeared in the eastern parts of China as an integrated tribal totem. Along with the dragon totem of the alliances of western and northern China, the phoenix tribe became one of the two large clans of early China. The image of the phoenix in ancient texts consists of a chicken's head, a chicken's beak, a swallow's mouth, a snake's neck, a dragon's patterning, a turtle's back, a roc's front and a kyllin's hindquarters, a fish's tail and a pair of wings. The phoenix's coloring is comprised of a cyan head, a red mouth and beak, a black chest, and yellow claws and toes. The three distinguishing characteristics are its eyes, the legs and the tail.

The "Guang-ya" stated that phoenix, or 'feng', is a collective term for 'feng-huang,' which

includes both the male 'feng' and the female 'huang'. Therefore, the 'feng', or phoenix, of ancient times was not representative of women as it is today. The legend of the "Bamboo Flute Attracts the Phoenix" from the Han Dynasty ends with Xiao Shi riding a red dragon and Nong Yu riding a phoenix, flying off into the sky to become a celestial couple. Later generations praise good son-in-laws with the phrase "cheng long kuai xu," or "the fine son-in-law who rides the dragon," and the phoenix naturally became both the counterpart to the dragon and synonymous with brides. During the Qin and Han Dynasties, the four animals cyan dragon, white tiger, red (sparrow) phoenix and the xuan-wu represented east, west, south and north, with the phoenix transforming into a deity. Ancient China used the dragon to represent the emperor, and the noble and splendid phoenix became the symbol of the empress and concubines.

### The Development of the Phoenix Crown

The Phoenix Crown of the First Emperor (Qin Dynasty) had a head made of gold and silver, feet made of tortoise shell, and was called the "Phoenix Hairpin". The Eastern Han Dynasty (59 AD) established an imperial edict stating that hairpins with 'feng-huang' decorations shall be the formal headpiece for the empress dowager and imperial grandmother. The headpiece for concubines of the Tang Dynasty were very sophisticated, consisting of 12 'dian', 'hua-shu' of various sizes, and great pins (rectangular decorations attached at the sideburns). It was not until the Song Dynasty that these elements combined to form the phoenix crown. The actual establishment of the phoenix crown as a headpiece of the "formalwear system" began during the Song Dynasty. It was a formal decree of the Northern Song Dynasty that empresses and concubines must wear phoenix crowns when attending ceremonies. The headpiece of the empress dowager and imperial grandmother was the "long-feng-hua-chai crown" (dragon-phoenix flower hairpiece-crown), the imperial concubines wore the "nine pheasant four phoenix", and the noblewoman donned the "hua-chai crown" decorated with patterns of long-feathered pheasants.

The Ming Dynasty (1370 AD) decreed that the empress wear the "shuang-feng yi-long crown" (double phoenix flying dragon crown) and the "long-feng-zhu-cui crown" (dragon-phoenix red-green crown). Imperial concubines wore the "nine pheasant four phoenix" and officials' wives wore the "hua-chai crown." Ranked according to quality, there was the zhai (a pheasant with long tail feathers), the peacock, the mandarin duck and the Lien-chueh (Shou-t'ai-niao); there was no phoenix patterns. The "Ming-shi yu-fu-zhi", stated, "In the early Ming Dynasty, a commoner who marries is allowed to wear the clothing of the officials." From the above text, it is easy to see that while the headpieces of the officials' wives were decorated with Lien-chueh, and not phoenixes, it was still usually called the "phoenix crown."

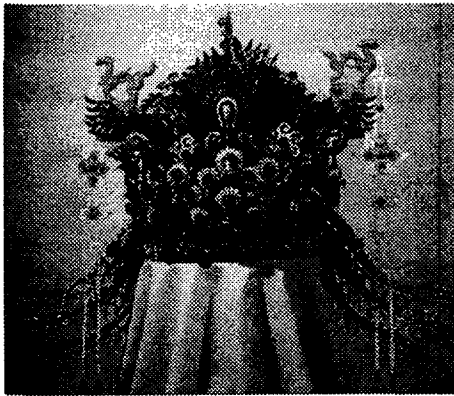
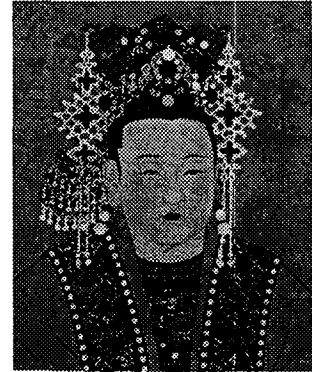
Four phoenix crowns have been excavated from the Ding-ling grave of the Ming Dynasty (established in 1584). The crowns were incredibly luxurious. The base of the crown was made of bamboo strips surrounded by a layer of yarn. Dragons and phoenixes made of gold and jade, and

flower designs made with pearls were then attached to the crown. Each crown had over 5000 pearls and 100 precious stones.

After the Ming Dynasty was overthrown and the Qing Dynasty was established by the Manchurians, it was ordered that all Chinese had to adopt Manchurian clothing, and Chinese men were required to shave their heads. This created a large amount of dissension. Due to the resistance against these new customs, the Qing emperors accepted the advice of "Ten points must be followed, ten points can be ignored," meaning that certain imperial decrees must be followed by the populace, while certain others did not, for example, "Men must follow the decrees, women are not required to; officials must follow the decrees, but not during weddings," etc.,. Therefore, men were allowed to grow queues but still had to shave the front part of their heads, and women were still allowed to wear Chinese-style clothing. During weddings, the groom must wear Manchurian clothing, while the bride could wear Chinese clothing, apply makeup in the Ming Dynasty style, and wear the wedding Phoenix scarf. This harmonious combining of Manchurian and Chinese styles in wedding outfits can still be seen in the weddings of today with the long gowns and mandarin jackets worn by men, and phoenix crowns and scarves worn by women.

## Conclusion

"Long-feng cheng-xiang" (auspiciousness brought by the dragon and phoenix) is a well-known blessing for weddings. From being a tribal totem, the phoenix pattern evolved into the most revered symbol for women. It slowly developed from the love story in the "Bamboo Flute Attracts the Phoenix" legend into the traditional Chinese phoenix pattern totem of love and marriage's cultural definition. Within the Chinese clothing culture, in addition to people's deification of the 'phoenix' totem, it's original metaphor for the respect, splendor and reverence of the empress slowly evolved into the being the symbol of wives. Xu Ke of the Qing Dynasty said, "The phoenix crown was the most respected headpiece of women in ancient times, ... in the Ming Dynasty, when common people married off their daughters, they would also unlawfully use phoenix crowns. ...Its use continued into the Qing Dynasty. Regardless of social ranking, when children married, the bride was required to wear the phoenix crown and scarf to show that she was the wife, and not a concubine." From this, one can see the phoenix crown has been spreading for thousands of years within the Chinese culture. It is no longer simply an ordinary hat, but rather the most highly respected traditional symbol of women among the collective Chinese cultural images.



- A. Phoenix pattern on a tomb from the Chu nation of the Warring States period
- B. The phoenix image.
- C. The Ming Dynasty empress wear "double phoenix flying dragon crown".
- D. The phoenix crown from the Ding-ling grave of the Ming Dynasty (established in 1584)
- E. Chinese wedding in 1920's , bride wearing phoenix crown, the groom wears long robe.