

Research on the Shape and Structure of *Mamianqun* in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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Abstract: *Mamianqun* (horse-faced skirt) is one of the most typical dress patterns of traditional Chinese costume. In the long history of *mamianqun*, it was the Ming and Qing dynasties that were the heyday of its development. The changes were varied, and the styles were also novel and changeable, all of which demonstrated the mature progress of traditional costume in the Ming and Qing dynasties, making it the epitome of costume during that period. Starting from *mamianqun*, this paper focuses on the shape and structure of *mamianqun* during the Ming and Qing dynasties as its research subject and explores the significance of the times behind *mamianqun* by analyzing its shape, structure, and modeling characteristics.

Keywords: Mamianqun; Chinese silk robe

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1. Introduction

The term *mamianqun* first appeared in the “History of the Ming Palace,” describing it as follows: “Trolling, its system of the back placket is continuous, and there is a pendulum on both sides, the front placket is two, and there are horse face pleats below, rising to both sides.” The overall appearance of the *mamianqun* resembled a horse’s face, with the central skirt door aligning, reminiscent of the gate tower of a horse-faced city wall. Additionally, the central skirt door of *mamianqun* originated from the large pieces of clothes used in ancient aristocratic attire to cover the thighs and knees, wrapping around the waist and extending to the knees. Primarily serving to protect against cold and cover the lower body, its function resembled that of a horse-faced wall, hence the name *mamianqun*.

Mamianqun held significant importance among women’s attire in the Ming and Qing dynasties, often paired with jackets and cardigans. The classic structure of the Ming *mamianqun* comprised two pieces at the waist and four skirt doors. These four skirt doors were stacked, with overlapping sections in the middle referred to as horse faces. This structural design catered to the equestrian skills of Ming Dynasty women, allowing for greater ease when riding. Thus, a horse-faced, two-piece, pleated structure emerged.

2. The shape and structure of *mamianqun* in the Ming Dynasty

The *mamianqun* in the Ming Dynasty represented the most classic structure of this attire. It consisted of two large pieces of fabric forming the entire skirt, with both pieces sharing a common waist door. The overlapping front sections of these two pieces created what was referred to as the “horse face” (Figure 1). The two pieces of fabric directly overlapped behind, forming the “back horse face.” The length of the horse-faced skirt varied depending on the wearer’s height, generally reaching down to the ankles.

Another prominent structural feature was the presence of pleats. Based on existing examples of *mamianqun* from the Ming Dynasty, it can be concluded that the skirt structure typically consisted of two overlapping pieces of cloth, with each fold composed of three and a half pieces of cloth. This structural pattern remained popular across various regions from the early Ming Dynasty through to the end of the Qing Dynasty, representing a typical feature of *mamianqun* during this era. Examination of recorded *mamianqun*, both in detailed texts and illustrations, reveals a unique pleating technique wherein each group of pleats often features closed pleats in the middle (Figure 2). The ingenuity of this pleating method lies in its ability to create inner I-shaped folds that snugly fit along the waist side of the body, ensuring a harmonious alignment with the body’s curves and avoiding uneven pleating when wearing the *mamianqun*.

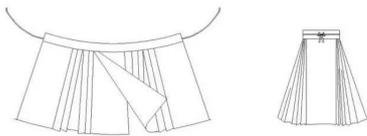


Figure 1. Structure of *mamianqun*

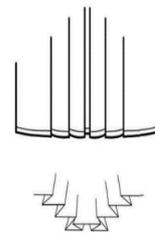


Figure 2. Hugging I-folds

During the early Ming Dynasty, the costume system inherited from the previous dynasty was still prevalent, and the *mamianqun*’s form had recently been established. Consequently, *mamianqun* from this period exhibited a more “simple and natural” artistic form and style, both in overall appearance and detailing. Initially, *mamianqun* utilized more than six pieces of fabric. Over time, as societal attitudes towards fashion evolved, the number of fabric pieces increased to eight or ten^[1]. In the early stages, the skirt’s side sections featured large, spaced-out folds, which gradually transitioned into delicate, densely packed pleats in later periods.

Additionally, influenced by the Song-style aesthetics, the overall color of *mamianqun* in the Ming Dynasty, particularly among the populace, tended to be light, with plain white skirts even gaining popularity during the Chongzhen period. In terms of decoration, the layout of patterns on *mamianqun* in the Ming Dynasty was unconventional, often featuring a horizontal ribbon-like distribution, predominantly adorned on the knee and hem sections. Modern scholars refer to this ribbon-like pattern of decoration as “*qunlan*” (Figure 3).

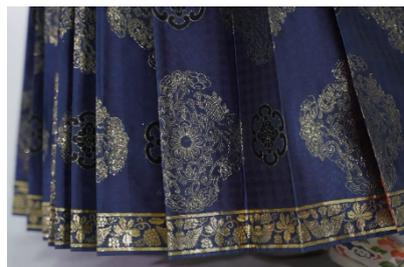


Figure 3. *Qunlan*

3. The shape and structure of *mamianqun* in the Qing Dynasty

The overall shape and structure of the *mamianqun* from the Ming Dynasty persisted until the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China. Following the basic establishment of these skirts' shape during the Ming Dynasty, the Qing Dynasty witnessed further evolution in response to changing times and shifting aesthetics. During the Qing Dynasty, the *mamianqun* transitioned into a common daily attire for women, becoming a distinctive style synonymous with the era, characterized by various styles such as the railing skirt (*langanqun*), pleated skirt, fish-scale pleated skirt (*yulinqun*), moonlight skirt (*yuehuaqun*), and phoenix tail skirt (*fengweiqun*).

3.1. *Langanqun*

The most notable difference between the *mamianqun* of the Qing Dynasty and that of the Ming Dynasty lies in the treatment of the skirt. In the Qing Dynasty, the skirt of the *mamianqun* adopted two main forms: splicing and pleating [2]. The spliced skirt consisted of triangular or trapezoidal fabric pieces, with seams edged in dark fabric to create a visual effect resembling a “railing,” hence also known as “*langanqun*” (railing skirt; **Figure 4**).



Figure 4. *Langanqun*

The skirts are further categorized into pleated or non-pleated variations. The pleated skirt retained the basic shape of the Ming Dynasty *mamianqun* but underwent additional pleating and processing. Conversely, the non-pleated skirt departed from the traditional pleated style by employing a “cutting instead of folding” technique, where fabric pieces were cut into triangular or trapezoidal shapes and stitched together, with seams edged in dark fabric to mimic “three-dimensional pleating” through “flat patchwork.” Both styles utilized diaphragm edges and featured skirt doors and skirts inlaid with matching fabric, imparting a sense of visual order.

3.2. Pleated skirt

In the Ming Dynasty, *mamianqun* pleats were typically large and loose, allowing for ease of movement, and reflecting the equestrian culture of the era. However, with cultural evolution and shifting aesthetics during the Qing Dynasty, pleats became thinner, denser, and more fixed. The number of pleats increased significantly, from 6 to 10 pleats in the Ming Dynasty to dozens in the Qing Dynasty, resulting in what became known as pleated skirts (**Figures 5 and 6**).



Figure 5. The structure of the pleated skirt

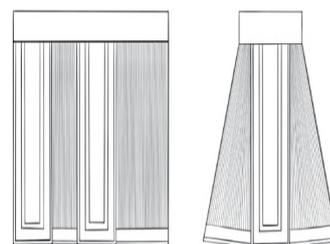


Figure 6. Pleated skirt

Pleated skirts were documented as early as the Qing Dynasty, where “hundred” denoted a large quantity rather than a specific number, indicating numerous fine pleats. These pleats were often fixed at both ends, symmetrically pleated from the sides towards the middle along the skirt’s midline, creating a hugging pleat posture. This pleating technique effectively prevented “fried pleats” and ensured that the skirt conformed closely to the body’s curves.

3.3. *Yulinqun*

The *yulinqun* builds upon the foundation of the pleated skirt, further enhancing the benefits of pleating. To prevent the pleats from unraveling, silk threads cross-stitch the pleats, with approximately 1 cm of stitches securing every 2 cm or so. Moreover, the seam points between adjacent pleats stagger up and down ^[3]. This technique creates pleats that resemble the scales of a fish, thus earning the name *yulinqun* (Figure 7).



Figure 7. *Yulinqun*

3.4. *Yuehuaqun*

Derived from the *yulinqun*, the *yuehuaqun* introduces a shift from monochrome to multi-color stitching. This variant, named *yuehuaqun*, took its inspiration from the colorful aura of moonlight on clouds. Some scholars speculate that the name “*yuehua*” derives from the color changes observed when women walk in these skirts. The defining feature of the *yuehuaqun* is the use of different colors on each side of the *mamianqun*. Bright colors mingle with dark or polychrome hues, sometimes creating striking contrasts. In essence, the *yuehuaqun* is a multi-colored *mamianqun* with multiple layers (Figure 8). While the shape of the *yuehuaqun* closely resembles that of the *yulinqun*, their popularity during the era varied.



Figure 8. *Yuehuaqun*

3.5. *Fengweiqun*

Belonging to a significant offshoot of the *mamianqun*, the *fengweiqun* emerged in the late Qing Dynasty, characterized by its distinctive shamanic influence. It represents a fusion of the shaman’s skirt and the *mamianqun*. While sharing similarities with the *mamianqun* in overall structure, the *fengweiqun* also exhibits notable differences. Comprising a skirt waist and several separated strips, the number of strips typically ranges from six to dozens ^[4]. The strips of the *fengweiqun* commonly feature a rectangular top and a sword-shaped bottom, adorned with bells and other ornaments along their length, resembling the tail of a phoenix (Figures 9 and 10).



Figure 9. Structure of *fengweiqun* (monochrome)

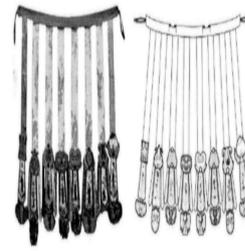


Figure 10. Structure of *fengweiqun* (colored)

4. The visual representation of the shape and structure of *mamianqun* in the Ming and Qing dynasties

The silhouette of a garment offers the most immediate visual experience. Influenced by Confucianism, China's traditional attire embodies subtlety and imagery, forming a distinctive aesthetic. Consequently, the silhouette of the *mamianqun* naturally appears flat, with minimal emphasis on the waistline and straight-cut pieces lacking darts. This design ethos ensures that the garment does not constrict movement, allowing for a loose fit that creates a casual, natural, and harmonious space around the body. As a foundational element of traditional Chinese attire, the *mamianqun* primarily considers the proportion of the waist circumference, hip sides, and hem. The silhouette of the *mamianqun* varies depending on the types of pleats at the skirt waist and the length adjustments to match the wearer's height, leading to the classification of two main types: the "A" type and the "H" type.

The "A" shaped *mamianqun* features trapezoidal pleats, narrow at the top and widening towards the bottom, resembling the exaggerated puffy skirts seen in modern fashion. This style emerged due to the Ming Dynasty's unique clothing proportions, where blouse and skirt lengths differed significantly from those of the Tang and Song dynasties. During the Ming Dynasty, the length of blouses varied widely, resulting in noticeable disparities in top and bottom lengths. The skirt length trended from short to long, starting from around 80 to 90 cm during the Jiajing period, increasing to 100 cm by the Wanli period, and reaching 120 cm by the end of the Ming Dynasty. Adjustments in the skirt silhouette were made to accommodate these changes, ensuring visual harmony in the overall outfit. For instance, pairing a short blouse with trapezoidal pleats with an "A" shaped *mamianqun* created a cohesive visual appearance. Conversely, pairing a long top with an "A" shaped *mamianqun* would affect the exaggerated A-line shape of the skirt hem, limiting each other's effects and overall outfit coordination. Therefore, "A" shaped *mamianqun* were often worn with cropped tops.

During the middle and late Ming Dynasty, and into the Qing Dynasty, wearing *bijia* (long, sleeveless jacket) became a societal custom, originating from the Yuan Dynasty and gaining popularity among women. This led to the development of long jackets for women to match the "H" shaped *mamianqun*, transitioning from exaggerated "A" shaped silhouettes to slender "H" shaped silhouettes. Compared to the "A" shaped *mamianqun*, the "H" shaped *mamianqun* creates a more slender and elongated appearance, accentuating the graceful figure of women.

5. Conclusion

The *mamianqun* stands as a quintessential representative of traditional Chinese attire, serving as a previous custodian of history and culture. It embodies artistic and spiritual aesthetics deeply rooted in the profound heritage of the Chinese nation, encapsulating cultural legacy and historical significance that warrant integration

into modern life. It is imperative to foster a deeper understanding of the unique allure of traditional Chinese attire among a wider audience.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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