

## The style evolution of nail guards in ancient China and the continuation of female aesthetic taste

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**Abstract:** As a part of "hand ornaments" in gold and silver jewelry of ancient China, nail guards have a unique charm and status. The origin of gold and silver nail guards can be traced back to the Northern and Southern Dynasties, and they became prevalent in the Qing Dynasty. Nail guards were not only a distinctive symbol of women's fashion and treasures but also indicated their identity and status through materials and craftsmanship. Modern women are obsessed with nail decorations, which reflects their aesthetic taste that originated from ancient women who wore gold and silver nail guards hundreds or even thousands of years ago, thus revealing the continuation of women's aesthetics under social and cultural influences.

### 1. Cultural background and class symbol of the emergence of nail guards in ancient China

Jewelry was born and developed alongside human civilization, closely related to social customs and cultural atmosphere. It contains traces of social history, life history, customs history, and ideological history, closely combined with contemporary aesthetic systems, achieving a fusion of art and fashion. Nail guards are a unique category in ancient Chinese jewelry.

The "Qing Bai Lei Chao · Clothing Section" records: "Golden nailnails are worn by women on their nails as ornaments, to make their nails slim like spring onions. They are available on all nails except the thumbs." Gold nailnails and gold and silver nail guards are a kind of ancient Chinese gold and silver jewelry. In the consciousness ideology born under the long cultural and historical background of China, the public believed that nails were the essence of the human body. Sun Simiao, a famous physician in the Tang Dynasty, recorded in "Qian Jin Fang (Important Prescriptions Worth a Thousand Gold for Emergency) - Nurture Life": "It is auspicious to cut toenails and burn white hair on the day of Yin." Therefore, like hair, nails cannot be arbitrarily destroyed or cut. This was already an important taboo factor concerning fortune deeply engraved in people's consciousness at that time, so many ancient people had a habit of growing nails, and long and slender nails were also the aesthetic trend at the time. The traditional practice of Chinese ancient women growing and adorning their nails with nail guards has a long history. "Peacock Flies Southeast" depicts Liu Lanzhi's "nails as slim as chopped green onions," and Gu Kuang's "Song a Qinke Abandoned by Yicheng" in the Tang Dynasty recorded: " My high hair bun swept up, with a few strands of hair falling down in front of the forehead, my nails are long, and I am adept at playing the Qin and Se, and equipped with literary talent," reflecting the trend of women growing nails at that time. Nail guards were invented to protect nails. Gold or silver nail guards have been unearthed from the Warring States Tomb in Jungar Banner of Inner Mongolia, the Han Tomb in Laoheshen Village, Dapo County, Yushu City, Jilin Province, and the Tomb of Li Jingxun, a Sui Dynasty girl in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province. The Han Dynasty gold nail guard unearthed in Laoheshen, Jilin Province is made of thin pieces of gold curled into a spiral style that extends upwards, with its thickness and length adjustable as needed, simple and practical. (Figure 1).

According to the "Qing Bai Lei Chao · Clothing Section": "silver" was used in ancient times as a material for nail guards when playing Chinese Zither. The term "ancient times" refers to the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, during which nail guards were made primarily of silver. These were worn by women who played stringed instruments, for two purposes: to protect their own nails from damage while playing, and to produce a clear and melodious sound when the silver plucked the strings. Hence, the nail guards were originally born with the purpose of practical

function. It is unclear from historical records what social class of women used nail guards, and thus they were not limited to musicians, courtesans, or noblewomen, and were used by women of all classes.



Figure 1: Han Dynasty gold nail guards unearthed in Laoheshen of Jilin Province

In the Ming Dynasty, nail guards made of gold or silver were used by women to protect their nails, still serving a practical purpose. However, due to their ability to enhance the appearance of slender and elegant nails, decorative and aesthetic elements were intertwined with the practical functionality, and the nail guard became an essential embellishment for creating the image of a charming and luxurious woman. This feminine aesthetic has continued to influence fashion trends until modern times.

During the Qing Dynasty, the wearing of nail guards became associated with social class distinction. It not only reflects the aesthetic preferences of the time, but also became a symbol of social status, exclusively for noble women and concubines in the palace, and a sign of a privileged and leisurely lifestyle, free from hard labor. "The Record of the Customs and Manners of Yanjing" described: "Women of prominent families have plenty of leisure time, do not engage in physical labor, and often grow long nails to amuse themselves." The Manchu women wore long nail guards in conjunction with their wide Cheongsam (a traditional dress), Da La Chi (Manchu-style headdress), and high-heel shoes, adding to their sense of grandeur and opulence. Later on, nail guards were also included as customary gifts from men to women in Manchu engagement, with two-piece sets of nail guards and rings or four-piece sets consisting of nail guards, rings, chains, and earrings or bracelets<sup>[1]</sup>.

It can be seen that nail guards became an important jewelry item for noble women in the Qing Dynasty to dress themselves up, and their materials and craftsmanship were highly sought after because they could show the wearer's social status. Nail guards were made of a variety of materials such as gold, silver, jade, tortoiseshell, pearls, and copper-gilt, and were crafted in ways such as hollowing, engraving, jewel setting, enamel, filigree, and cloisonne enameling (Figure 2&3). The higher the social status of the woman, the more precious the material and the more complicated the craftsmanship of her nail guards. According to "The Record of the Customs and Manners of Yanjing": "The nail guards are also inlaid with all kinds of delicate and exquisite flowers, plants, and animals, such as 'little butterflies' and 'orchid flowers', so abundant that no need to elaborate. However, their exquisite workmanship and the unusual material are all the same! There is a kind of pendant on the top of the nail guard, which is a delicate small chain more than an inch long, with various toys hanging from it, such as 'small embroidered balls', 'pomegranate seeds', and 'lotus seeds', all of which are cute and delicate. Inside this type of pendant, there are small balls that sound like little bells. When the hand moves slightly, the pendant will make a tinkling sound." This pendant on the nail guard is called "dai da leng er (pendant dangles)".

The pursuit of style, materials, and workmanship for nail guards greatly promoted the development of gold and silver smithing techniques; this pursuit contains the unique delicacy and vanity of women's pursuit of beauty, as well as the pleasing aesthetic derived from the male-dominated society. This aesthetic taste is reflected in various types of jewelry for women to this day, and its carrier is presented in an evolved form in modern society.



Figure 2: Tortoiseshell nail guards with jewelry and flowers (Qing Dynasty)



Figure 3: Copper-gilt nail guard with bamboo leaf motif, adorned with jadeite and tassel

## 2. Nail guards and female aesthetic expression

### 2.1 Connotation and extension of female aesthetic interest

Mr. Fuxing Xue has provided an accurate definition of the term "aesthetics": "What is aesthetics? It is the pursuit of immediate sensual and spiritual pleasure; aesthetic spirit is to affirm real life with immediate sensory and spiritual experiences, and ultimately to love life and enjoy it."

Under the influence of the patriarchal society in China for thousands of years, women have long been viewed as objects of aesthetics. Most studies on "women's aesthetics" treat women as objects of aesthetics<sup>[3]</sup>, regardless of whether it is the description of women's inner beauty, such as "a woman without talent is virtue" and "beautiful appearance and intelligent inside" or the description of external beauty, such as "A slim and graceful lady is much sought after by gentlemen". These two description directly interprets women's aesthetics as "how women should be beautiful". Yet, this article intends to explore women's perception of beauty, namely the pure sensory and spiritual level of aesthetics and the social and cultural factors that contribute to this aesthetic consciousness.

Women integrate people's aesthetic expectations of physical beauty with their own role as an aesthetic object, forming a unique pure aesthetic taste. They pay more attention to their appearance, clothing and figure than men do, integrating aesthetic values into specific aesthetic practices.<sup>[2]</sup> This is a special aspect of the emergence and development of women's aesthetics that cannot be ignored. As Nietzsche said, "Men create women's images for themselves, and women imitate these images to create themselves." Although this aesthetic value reveals gender rights infringement, that is, it is centered on male aesthetic taste, viewpoint and ideal, it is not difficult to study that this feminine aesthetic taste has been rooted in women since its birth until today.

Women's aesthetics is a special aesthetic where the subject group exists as both subject and

object. The proportion of women as subject and object in women's aesthetic taste reflects women's status. In modern aesthetic taste, the balance between women as aesthetic "subject" and "object" is gradually shifting. The standards of women's aesthetic values are becoming more diverse, and the consciousness of female subjects and the values they hold are constantly improving, broadening the scope of research on women's aesthetics, and emphasizing the expression of women's self-awareness.

## **2.2 Nail guards-carrier of female aesthetic**

The birth of nail guards requires a unified set of nurturing conditions and the emergence of female aesthetic definitions. As an item of jewelry, it is a product of the development of human civilization. As a pure aesthetic object, it can reflect the social atmosphere and cultural background of the time in an intuitive way.

According to the "Added Imperial Edition of the Dictionary of Qing Dynasty" in the early Qing Dynasty, there were almost no descriptions of nail guards, indicating that it was not a popular accessory in the imperial court at that time. It was not until Empress Dowager Cixi's enthusiasm for nail guards sparked an aesthetic trend that wearing various colors of exquisite nail guards became fashionable in the palace and beyond. Nail guards quickly became an important category of jewelry sought after by court ladies and wealthy women. In "Two Years in the Forbidden City," De Ling, the daughter of the Chinese Ambassador to France, Yugeng, noted that "Empress Dowager Cixi wore golden guards on her right hand and jade guards on the two fingers of her left hand, both three inches long." American female painter Catherine A. Carl described in "With the Empress Dowager of China" that Empress Dowager Cixi wore nail guards on her "middle and ring fingers, jade on her left hand and gold studded with rubies and pearls on her right. As an uncrowned queen who held power in China for 47 years, Empress Dowager Cixi's aesthetic ability and taste represented the highest level of women's cognition of beauty at that time. This cognition probably did not include the desire for women as aesthetic objects to be appreciated and evaluated, but was a purely spiritual understanding starting from the aesthetic subject. Political power and gender power are equally assertive and subservient, so Empress Dowager Cixi's love for nail guards became a barometer, influencing the aesthetic standards of women at that time in terms of an absolute weight. It also gave nail guards appropriate power colors and established their iconic status in showcasing female beauty, power and self-value.

## **3. The style evolution of nail guards in modern jewelry and the continuation of female aesthetics**

### **3.1 Evolution of the modern form of nail guards**

The ancient Chinese people's love and care for their nails have been passed down to this day. Nail guards have also evolved into new forms in modern jewelry and nail decoration. Since modern people no longer grow long nails, the functional aspect of nail guards, which is protecting the nails, is no longer necessary. What remains is its decorative feature, satisfying the demand for aesthetics.

Today, women's love for nail decoration jewelry still appears as an important element of women's appearance in fashion. Among them, we can see the evolution from ancient nail guards to new forms. International forefront fashion brands and trend brands have launched fingertip decorative jewelry that matches seasonal fashion. Karl Lagerfeld, the famous designer, once had craftsmen make a large box of fingertip rings to match the 2013 CHANEL haute couture fashion show. Beyonce, the famous singer, wore an 18k platinum and diamond nail guard in the music video "Sweet Dreams", conveying the beauty of feminine power through clothing and accessories (Figure 4&5).

When it comes to brands that focus on promoting nail guards as a jewelry item in contemporary times, we cannot ignore the Korean brand Unistella. In 2019, both Burberry and NIKE commissioned Unistella to customize brand-logo finger guards (Figure 6). This signifies that this modern derivative of nail guards, as an important element of women's decoration, is naturally

accepted by modern aesthetic principles and widely used.



Figure 4: Chanel Autumn/Winter 2013/2014 Haute Couture Accessories of Fingertip Rings

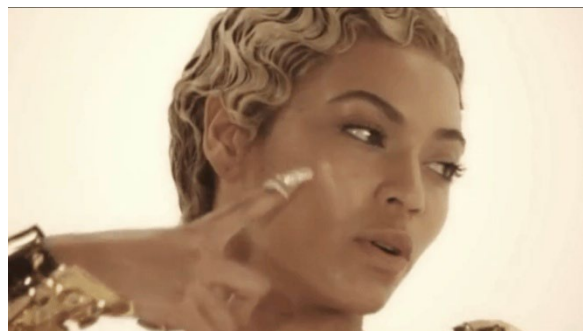


Figure 5: Beyonce wearing a 18K-platinum and diamond nail guard for Sweet Dreams



Figure 6: Burberry and NIKE's collaborative finger guards with Unistella

Unistella's design is based on finger guards, with various avant-garde styles and affordable materials. The price for their products, which use materials like 925 silver plated with 14k gold and combined with low-cost gemstones such as cubic zirconia and crystal, is around 700 RMB per piece. When the products were released, they sold out quickly, reflecting that as finger guard jewelry becomes more affordable, the consumer base is no longer limited to just the upper class. The concept of feminine power has been integrated into the lives of countless women, and every woman can now wear nail guards to show off her personal style and individualized aesthetic freely.

### 3.2 The continuation of the female aesthetic taste contained in the new form of nail guards

Aesthetic perception is an activity in which the subject's psychological function experiences the object in a visual way. However, in the long history of culture, women have been separated as a

symbolic intention to become the aesthetic object of experience, labeled as "beauty" and objectified and symbolized. Women were objects for expressing the emotions and fantasies of a male-dominated society. As time passed, the status of women gradually transformed from an object to a subject. They utilized their unique aesthetic psychology in aesthetic cognition.

The particularity of women's aesthetic taste lies in the fact that women merge as both the aesthetic object to be appreciated and the aesthetic subject that perceives beauty. This spiritual-level conscious arose and developed from the formation of human culture and historical processes and still attracts and influences them with great force until today<sup>[4]</sup>. The form of nail guards has changed, with more freedom in design, updated forms, wider materials, more diverse prices, and service for clients from all social classes. This progress is necessary and inevitable with the development of times. However, this progress is based on the maintenance of essence and continuation, rather than revolution.

Women's aesthetic preferences for nail guards break the limits of class, and the new and broader existence of nail guards still serves women. The wonderful aesthetic taste inherent in women, as well as the traces of society, history, life, and ideas, are expressed and propagated through nail guards. This is connotation that we should explore and find in modern jewelry design.

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