



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nijincaiqli Lacquerware in Wedding Customs: Gender Symbols and Cultural Significance in Ninghai County

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ABSTRACT

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Nijincaiqli is a traditional lacquerware craft unique to Zhejiang Province, combining both Nijin and lacquer techniques. It is widely used in household and daily life utensils, particularly holding a significant position in wedding culture. This paper explores the gender symbolism and cultural significance of bucket-shaped Nijincaiqli lacquerware in the wedding customs of the Ninghai region. Through literature review and field research, the study delves into the gender symbolism of the shapes and colors of these Nijincaiqli buckets. The research finds that these lacquerware pieces not only showcase exquisite craftsmanship but also reflect societal expectations of women's roles and status, reinforcing the ideals of female virtues and roles in traditional weddings.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview of the Development of Nijincaiqli

Nijincaiqli is a traditional lacquerware craft characterized by the combination of Nijin and lacquer techniques. It is a unique and endangered craft from Zhejiang Province that was once widely used for surface decoration in home architecture, daily utensils, and especially held a significant role in local wedding customs. It is closely linked to the "Ten-Mile Red Dowry" culture of eastern Zhejiang. In June 2011, Nijincaiqli was listed as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage.

The history of the Nijincaiqli craft can be traced back to the Neolithic era, with a lacquered bow unearthed at the Kuahuqiao site in Zhejiang, which is over 8,000 years old (Picture 1). The lacquer stacking technique used in Nijincaiqli first appeared during the Han Dynasty. Several lacquerware pieces unearthed from the Western Han tombs at Mawangdui in Changsha were decorated using this technique. The patterns on these pieces are distinctly raised, creating a low-relief decorative effect (Picture 2). During the Song Dynasty, the lacquer stacking technique gradually matured, with the Song Dynasty's inscribed and gilded stacked lacquered sandalwood reliquary box being a typical example (Picture 3). It features a sandalwood core with patterns built up using lacquer mud, resulting in a luxurious and intricate design. In the Qing Dynasty, the lacquer stacking technique reached its peak, producing a variety of lacquerware, with the most representative being the Nijincaiqli from the Zhejiang region (Picture 4).



During the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China period, Nijincaiqli craftsmanship was extensively used in the production of furniture for traditional weddings in eastern Zhejiang. The lacquered furniture was colorful and finely crafted, becoming a distinctive feature of local wedding customs. The wedding items made with Nijincaiqli techniques not only had a strong sense of everyday life and practical functionality but also showcased beautiful designs and splendid appearances, reflecting a blend of utility and aesthetics, as well as emotional and rational beauty. These household items came in various categories, including beds, cabinets, tables, stools, boxes, and buckets. Among these, buckets were the most distinctive, varied, and widely used.

The combination of Nijincaiqli and buckets was both accidental and inevitable. Buckets were widely used in ancient China and had a long history, carrying certain symbolic meanings. As a container, a bucket's most basic symbolism is to hold and contain. It could hold water, grain, or other items, symbolizing gathering and accumulation. The production of wooden buckets required solid wood and exquisite craftsmanship, symbolizing strength and stability. Locals in Zhejiang refer to all kinds of cylindrical wooden objects as buckets, which were essential for both weddings and post-marriage life. Buckets in ordinary families were often simple and unadorned in design, while those made by wealthier families were decorated with stacked lacquer, carvings, and gold embellishments to display their prosperity (Zhao Fan, 2013). In traditional Zhejiang weddings, buckets made with Nijincaiqli techniques became an important part of the dowry.

As a significant component of Ninghai's wedding customs, Nijincaiqli lacquerware holds special meaning. Current research on Nijincaiqli mainly focuses on its techniques, inheritance, and preservation, but its gender symbolism should not be overlooked. This paper studies the gender symbolism of representative bucket-shaped Nijincaiqli lacquerware in traditional Zhejiang weddings, analyzing it primarily from the aspects of shape and color. By examining the gender symbolism of bucket-shaped Nijincaiqli lacquerware in Ninghai weddings, and considering the cultural background of the time, the paper explores the cultural implications behind it.

1.2 Analysis of the Current Research Status and Problem Statement on Nijincaiqli

Currently, research on Nijincaiqli is mostly focused on exploring its craftsmanship characteristics and discussing models for its preservation and transmission. A search using "Nijincaiqli" as a keyword on the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) database yields 43 papers, with 50% addressing the preservation and transmission of Nijincaiqli, 35% discussing its craftsmanship, 7% covering its history, and 8% focusing on product innovation. There are seven books available on Nijincaiqli, which cover similar topics as the papers, primarily focusing on craft introduction, historical description, preservation and transmission strategies, and product development. However, there is little research that delves into the cultural significance of Nijincaiqli within the local context.

Since Nijincaiqli craftsmanship is related to the local "Red Dowry" culture, a search using "Ten-Mile Red Dowry" as a keyword on CNKI returns 94 papers, of which 18 are related to Nijincaiqli craftsmanship, typically introducing Nijincaiqli lacquerware as part of the furniture used in local wedding customs.

There are two papers specifically on Nijincaiqli lacquerware buckets. One is Zhao Fan's 2013 paper, "A Study on the Correlation between Ten-Mile Red Dowry Objects and Customs," and the other is Xu Yuankai's 2018 paper, "Semantic Analysis of Bucket-Shaped Objects in the 'Ten-Mile Red Dowry'." In Zhao Fan's paper, the focus is on the essence of object design, exploring traditional design methods, aesthetic connotations, and thought processes, and investigating the human factors behind the objects. The study revolves around the relationship between objects, people, and wedding customs,

proposing the new perspective that objects constrain people. The paper provides a detailed classification of buckets in the Red Dowry furniture (Zhao Fan, 2013). In Xu Yuankai's paper, the buckets in Red Dowry furniture are classified based on their shape characteristics (Xu Yuankai, 2018).

Bucket-shaped Nijincai qi lacquerware in weddings plays a significant role in wedding customs, serving not only practical purposes but also symbolizing the owner's status due to its ornate appearance and complex production process. The primary users of these bucket-shaped Nijincai qi lacquerware items in weddings are women, and the gender symbolism of their function and appearance, as well as the cultural implications behind them, are worth studying. An analysis of the existing literature reveals that there is no research on the gender symbolism of bucket-shaped Nijincai qi lacquerware, and the cultural implications reflected in them have not been summarized. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to the research on Nijincai qi in these two areas. By uncovering the gender characteristics of Nijincai qi lacquerware, we can gain a deeper understanding of gender concepts, values, and social structures within specific cultural contexts, and also enhance our comprehensive understanding and appreciation of Nijincai qi lacquerware.

1.3 Research Objectives

1.3.1 To study the Gender Symbolism of Bucket-Shaped Nijincai qi Lacquerware in Ninghai Weddings

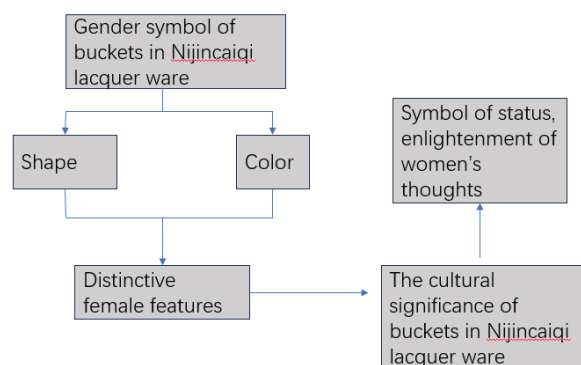
1.3.2 To study the Cultural Significance of Bucket-Shaped Nijincai qi Lacquerware in Ninghai Weddings

2. Research Hypothesis and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Research Hypothesis

The bucket-shaped Nijincai qi lacquerware in Ninghai weddings symbolizes femininity, and the underlying culture represents an oppression of women's spirit and a moral coercion.

2.2 Conceptual Framework



3. RESEARCH METHODS:

3.1 Research methods

This research adopts the research method with qualitative research as the major starting point. Meanwhile, at the basis of data collection and facts observation, the method focus on the analysis of process and structure, seeks to obtain objectives field investigation data to carry out qualitative study and interpretation on research object.

A.Literature Survey Method

Analyze and collect relevant research results, and on this basis, understand the gender symbols and cultural significance of Nijincai qi, and provide relevant information for this study

B.Observation Method

Observation method is to observe the research objects in the natural state. Researcher will go deeper into the specific social environment, participate in and investigate cultural and artistic activities in person, and interact with research objects.

3.2 Data collection

The data collection of this study consists of two parts, secondary data and primary data.

A. Secondary Data

This part of the data will come from books, textbooks, research, documents, internet, and academic websites.

B. Primary Data

Conducting actual surveys and interviews at museums and art studios that produce Nijincaiqli to gather primary data

4. RESEARCH PROCESS AND RESULTS

4.1 Gender Symbolism of Nijincaiqli

Nijincaiqli lacquerware used in wedding customs is closely linked to the "Ten-Mile Red Dowry" culture of Zhejiang. This wedding tradition was prevalent in the Jiangnan region from the mid-Qing Dynasty to the end of the Republic of China, and it declined in the 1990s, primarily in the Ningbo and Shaoxing regions of Zhejiang, with Ninghai County in Ningbo City being the most representative.

4.1.1 Shape

In the in-depth study of Nijincaiqli lacquerware, the author not only reviewed a large amount of literature but also conducted a thorough field investigation in Ninghai County, Zhejiang Province. The primary goal of this visit was to better understand and analyze the position and characteristics of Nijincaiqli lacquerware within the Ten-Mile Red Dowry culture. The field investigation included visits to the Ten-Mile Red Dowry Museum, Ten-Mile Red Dowry Cultural Park, and the Oriental Art Museum, with a particular focus on observing and analyzing the Nijincaiqli lacquerware collections in these locations.

During the literature review, the author found that research on bucket-shaped lacquerware in Red Dowry furniture was relatively scarce. The only detailed analysis of this category attempted to classify the shapes of bucket-shaped lacquerware but failed to propose clear classification criteria, with the descriptions being overly general.

Through reviewing the literature and visiting museums that house Nijincaiqli lacquerware, it was discovered that the classification of bucket-shaped lacquerware in the Red Dowry varies based on different standards:

By purpose: The buckets can be categorized into four main types: bucket for food, bucket for make up, bucket for needlework, and bucket used when giving birth.

By handle presence: They can be divided into handled buckets and handleless buckets.

By handle structure: They can be classified into single-handled buckets and double-handled buckets.

By decorative motifs: They can be divided into decorated buckets and undecorated buckets.

By lid presence: They can be categorized into lidded buckets and lidless buckets.

By lid closure: Lidded buckets can be further divided into buckets with clasps and those without.

By lid opening: Lidded buckets can also be categorized into fully openable and semi-openable types.

Based on further research, the author found that among these buckets, those used for storing food are the most frequently decorated with Nijincaiqli techniques. However, make up bucket, needlework bucket, and childbirth bucket are primarily decorated with wood carving techniques. A few of these buckets use the flat floral technique of Nijincaiqli, while the embossed floral technique is used less frequently. Based on the analysis of existing literature and the author's own observations and understanding, it is believed that classifying the Nijincaiqli buckets used in Ninghai wedding customs according to their function is more comprehensive and reasonable, as well as more aligned with the local culture.



Classification of buckets

Below is a brief analysis of the design aspects of some representative Nijincai qi buckets:

There is an old Chinese saying, "Food is the god of the people," which deeply reflects the Chinese emphasis on food. Among the Nijincai qi-decorated buckets, those used for storing food are predominant, aligning closely with traditional Chinese values. Among the various types of buckets, the taonai bucket is the most typical and representative in shape.

In ancient times, women who had just given birth often faced the problem of insufficient milk supply. They would use a taonai bucket to borrow breast milk from neighbors to feed their children. The taonai bucket is designed to be small and delicate, resembling a little goose. It usually has a lid on top to keep the milk warm and protect it from bacteria, serving a function similar to that of a modern baby bottle. The overall lines of the taonai bucket are smooth, with a particularly rounded and full lower section, giving it a plump and charming appearance. It is both practical and aesthetically pleasing. Every detail showcases the ingenuity and craftsmanship of ancient artisans. The taonai bucket not only excels in its practical function but also carries rich cultural significance. It embodies the spirit of mutual aid among neighbors in traditional Chinese society and highlights the important role of women within the family. Whenever a mother carried a taonai bucket to a neighbor's house, she was not only securing the basic necessities for her child's survival but also conveying a simple yet profound sense of community and human warmth. The taonai bucket reflects the deep emotions and high regard that Chinese people have for food, family, and neighborly relations (Picture 5).



Picture 5

The *xiaotitong* (small carrying bucket) is another representative example of Nijincai qi buckets, with a particularly distinctive shape. The handle of the *xiaotitong* forms a smooth arc, seamlessly curving downward at the points where it connects to the lower container, resembling the graceful waistline of a woman. This design endows the *xiaotitong* with an elegant, delicate, and fluid aesthetic. Its exterior decoration is equally exquisite and luxurious, much like a beautifully adorned woman with a graceful waist, radiating charm and allure. The connection between the handle and the bucket body is carefully polished and carved to form a natural curve, offering a soft and flowing visual impression. The intricate patterns and colors that decorate the bucket body are meticulously designed and crafted, making the *xiaotitong* not only functionally exceptional but also achieving a high level of artistic beauty.

This design not only reflects the superb craftsmanship of ancient Chinese artisans but also imbues the *xiaotitong* with rich cultural significance. It symbolizes feminine grace and resilience, embodying the ancient society's reverence and admiration for female beauty. Whenever the *xiaotitong* is used or displayed, its graceful lines and splendid decorations bring aesthetic pleasure and cultural

enrichment to those who observe it. As a quintessential example of double-handled buckets, the *xiaotitong*, with its unique shape and ornate decoration, stands as a classic masterpiece of the Nijincai qi craft (Picture 6).



Picture 6

Among the various types of buckets, the Hehe Tong (Harmony Bucket) (Picture 7) stands out not only for its practical function but also for its special symbolism. The Hehe Tong is composed of two parts, representing the union of yin and yang and the harmonious relationship between husband and wife. As stated in *Huainanzi*: "The interaction of yin and yang brings about completion; the coordination of yin and yang energies is harmony." The design of the Hehe Tong reflects a deep respect for the traditional cultural concept of yin-yang balance and marital harmony, endowing the bucket with profound symbolic meaning.

Other bucket types, such as the Fen Tong (Powder Bucket) and Guo Tong (Fruit Bucket) (Picture 8), which are handleless, share similarities with the Hehe Tong. Their designs feature rounded, full shapes and smooth, natural lines, resembling the belly of a pregnant woman. This design not only imparts a sense of warmth and softness but also symbolizes the nurturing of life and procreation, embodying reverence for feminine vitality and motherhood.

The Hehe Tong symbolizes the balance of yin and yang and the harmonious relationship between husband and wife, while the Fen Tong and Guo Tong symbolize feminine vitality and the beauty of nurturing life through their rounded and full forms. These buckets are not only visually pleasing but also reflect the traditional Chinese cultural pursuit of harmony, vitality, and the celebration of feminine beauty through their unique designs and rich symbolism.



Picture 7



Picture 8

Nijincai qi buckets come in a wide variety of types and styles, each serving different purposes. However, by analyzing their design concepts and forms, typical representatives have been identified, and their outlines are summarized as shown in the diagram (Picture 9).



Picture 9

In Nijincai qi buckets, the design of the shapes often resembles the curves of a woman's waist, with smooth, rounded lines and few right angles, reflecting clear feminine characteristics that align with traditional Chinese aesthetics for female attributes. As noted by Ban Zhao in the Han Dynasty, "Yin

and Yang are distinct in nature, and men and women have different roles. Yang is characterized by firmness, while Yin is characterized by softness" (Ban Zhao, 1996). The notions of roundness, softness, and gentleness are expectations for women and have been upheld in patriarchal cultures as aesthetic standards. The shapes of Nijincaiqi buckets align with these aesthetic and moral requirements.

4.1.2 Color

Nijincaiqi buckets, as significant elements in weddings, predominantly feature the color red, which carries deep cultural significance.

4.1.2.1 Significance of Red in Weddings

In Chinese traditional culture, red has always been considered an auspicious and prosperous color. Its importance is rooted in its association with the "Five Elements" theory. According to this theory, red corresponds to fire, representing summer and intense vitality. Red symbolizes energy, hope, and positivity, embodying a vibrant and powerful hue. In ancient China, seasonal changes were important, and social activities were adjusted accordingly. Summer's close association with red reflects respect for and alignment with natural laws.

The use of red in weddings has been a consistent theme throughout history. Red symbolizes the sun and fire, representing warmth, light, and the source of life. It is seen as a symbol of positivity, beauty, and vitality. Additionally, red's connection with blood makes it a symbol of life and vigor. In ancient hunting or war scenes, the vivid blood reinforced this association. More deeply, red symbolizes life and fertility. In ancient China, fertility was seen as a primary purpose of marriage, especially the birth of male heirs to continue the family lineage and perform ancestral rites. Therefore, red in weddings is not only a wish for a prosperous life but also a symbolic reminder of the fertility responsibilities borne by women (Zhou Xiaohong, 1998).

In the context of feudal society, family power and traditional customs played a crucial role in people's lives. Each family member was entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining family honor and lineage. Thus, weddings were not just personal celebrations but also crucial moments for the family's future and continuity. Other red items in weddings, such as red wedding characters, red bridal sedan chairs, and red wedding candies, reflect this cultural tradition. These red elements prominently feature in weddings, adding to the festive atmosphere and symbolizing the vitality and fertility of the newlyweds and their families. The use of red infuses the wedding with liveliness and energy, while also emphasizing the solemnity and sacredness of marriage.

In modern times, despite changes in wedding practices and contents, traditional wedding spirits are still preserved and respected in many places. Red remains a primary color in many weddings, symbolizing good fortune, happiness, and the continuation of life. This reflects not only respect for tradition but also a deep-rooted family concept and reverence for life. In summary, red in traditional Chinese weddings is not only a celebration but also a reminder and exhortation of the fertility responsibilities for women.

4.1.2.2. Symbolism of Red Nijincaiqi in Weddings

Nijincaiqi, a distinguished example of traditional Chinese craftsmanship, is renowned for its exquisite decoration and superb technique. Its use in weddings is particularly prominent, with the color red playing a significant role in highlighting its unique cultural connotations. Red is chosen not only for its vividness and beauty but also for its deep cultural meaning, making it an indispensable symbol in weddings. The use of red Nijincaiqi in wedding ceremonies adds a festive atmosphere to the event and conveys heartfelt wishes for the couple's future happiness and fulfillment. The application of red infuses the wedding with a warm and joyful spirit, symbolizing a future filled with happiness and auspiciousness for the newlyweds.

Furthermore, Nijincaiqi itself is a symbol of traditional Chinese culture. Its creation involves a complex and meticulous process, embodying the wisdom and craftsmanship of ancient artisans. When combined with the use of red, these lacquerwares not only represent a continuation of traditional craftsmanship but also reflect respect for cultural heritage. The use of red Nijincaiqi in weddings showcases reverence for ancestral culture and the importance of cultural preservation, transforming the wedding into more than just a ceremony but a celebration of culture.

Red also symbolizes vitality and prosperity. Using red lacquerware in weddings signifies that the couple will embark on a life full of energy and success. This symbolic meaning is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, reflecting awe and admiration for life and natural forces, and adding greater significance to the wedding. The brilliance and elegance of red lacquerware not only adorn the wedding venue but also infuse the couple's future with endless vitality and hope.

Therefore, the choice of red Nijincaiqli in weddings is not only aesthetically pleasing but also rich in cultural significance. The symbolism and meaning of red in Chinese culture are fully expressed through its application in weddings. It represents life, vitality, nobility, and reverence for nature, becoming an integral part of Chinese culture that is conveyed and perpetuated through the wedding ceremony. This cultural tradition enriches the wedding's meaning and makes each piece of red Nijincaiqli a carrier and symbol of culture. Every red Nijincaiqli item carries wishes for the couple's bright future, symbolizing a marriage as vibrant, lively, and prosperous as the color red itself.

4.2 Cultural Significance of Nijincaiqli Buckets in Ninghai Wedding Customs

4.2.1 Wishes for a Good Life and the Concept of Harmonious Unity

In ancient Zhejiang, particularly in Ningbo, Nijincaiqli held a crucial place in wedding customs. As one of the traditional "Three Jins" of Ningbo, Nijincaiqli is renowned for its brilliant, colorful appearance, adding a festive and auspicious atmosphere to weddings. When a son was married, his parents would prepare a large wooden bed, while the bride's family would arrange festive Nijincaiqli red wedding furniture, including various types of buckets, boxes, and fruit containers. Buckets, being a key component of this red wedding furniture, not only serve practical purposes but also carry profound cultural significance.

Nijincaiqli buckets come in various shapes and designs, with rich and diverse decorative elements and numerous functions. The rounded, smooth lines of the buckets symbolize strength and resilience, reflecting the ancient people's respect for and admiration of nature, as well as their desire for harmonious coexistence with it. The bucket's patterns and designs are often intricate and related to natural elements such as flowers, birds, insects, fish, landscapes, and auspicious symbols. Ancient artisans skillfully incorporated the concept of harmony between humans and nature into their work.

The colors used in Nijincaiqli buckets primarily include red, gold, silver, and green, derived from nature. These vibrant colors are full of life and energy. By employing clever color combinations, ancient craftsmen infused the natural hues into the bucket designs, reflecting their reverence for and appreciation of nature. Their artistic techniques further integrated the beauty of nature into the buckets.

Buckets used in weddings, such as double-handled buckets, soft-handled buckets, octagonal buckets, hexagonal harmony buckets, tea buckets, and embroidered stools, showcase the exquisite skills and unique charm of Jiangnan folk craftsmanship. These beautiful wedding items reflect the era's aspiration for a good life and the craftsmanship's dedication and effort. Through material selection, color application, pattern design, and symbolic meanings, the design of these buckets cleverly embodies the concept of harmonious unity between humans and nature. This traditional craftsmanship not only serves practical purposes but also carries rich cultural connotations and aesthetic value.

4.2.2 Symbol of Social Status and the Concept of Lavish Dowries

Ningbo's local customs are deeply rooted in traditional practices related to marriage and rituals, which have significantly influenced the development of local crafts. In ancient Zhejiang, particularly in the prosperous economic center of Ningbo, the practice of lavishly celebrating weddings was common among affluent families. The saying "thousand acres of good land, ten miles of red dowry" reflects this tradition, where the dowry was elaborately decorated with dragon and phoenix motifs to showcase the grandeur and joy of the wedding. The preparation of a substantial dowry expressed the parents' love and care for their daughter, ensuring she would not be treated poorly or mistreated in her new home. Additionally, a generous dowry was a symbol of the family's wealth and high status, serving as a display of family honor (Zhang Yapin, 2015). Nijincaiqli, as a key component of the "ten miles of red dowry," not only represents high craftsmanship but also symbolizes wealth and prosperity.

The process of making Nijincai qi involves numerous intricate steps, including hooping the bucket, applying base coats, drawing designs, adding lacquer paste, sculpting, and gilding, among over twenty procedures. A small piece requires several days to complete, while a large one can take several months or even half a year (Cui Wei, 2018). This extensive process highlights the significant time, financial resources, and labor involved in creating wedding furniture.

From the mid-Qing Dynasty to the end of the Republic of China, especially in the economically prosperous commercial centers like Ningbo, Nijincai qi played a crucial role in weddings. During this period, traditional feudal values still heavily influenced Chinese society, with wedding customs being particularly prominent. The use of Nijincai qi had transcended mere practicality to become a symbol of social status. Wealthy merchants in Ningbo often married into official families, not only to elevate their own social standing but also to demonstrate their family's wealth and influence through a lavish dowry. According to "Ninghai Ten Miles of Red Dowry," by the late Qing Dynasty, the Gu family in Shuanglin Village, Ninghai County, prepared over 200 pieces of dowry, including various types of Nijincai qi buckets, illustrating the grandeur of the wedding (Zhang Yapin, 2015).

This extravagant spending on weddings, with Nijincai qi as a significant part, became a symbol of luxury and opulence. Craftsmanship was highly sophisticated, with beautiful and elaborate decorations that reflected both artistic value and material wealth.

A local saying in Ningbo goes, "Families with money marry off their daughters, families without money sell their daughters." To avoid the stigma of "selling daughters," even impoverished families would go to great lengths to prepare a respectable dowry for their daughters. Wealthy families, on the other hand, would compete with others of similar social status by preparing lavish dowries, showcasing their family's power and wealth. This pursuit of extravagant dowries, with Nijincai qi as a key component, indirectly promoted the expansion and opulence of the craft.

Based on various sources and studies, the average annual income of ordinary people during the Qing Dynasty was around 10-20 taels of silver. However, the custom of "no dowry, no marriage" was well-known in Ningbo and Shaoxing regions. Therefore, regardless of their financial situation, families considered Nijincai qi dowries essential. The prevalence of lavish dowries created significant economic pressure for ordinary families. Although impoverished families could not afford such luxuries, even middle-class and small households would strive to imitate the opulence, sometimes at the cost of their entire savings or going into debt, just to provide their daughters with a respectable dowry and avoid being looked down upon by their in-laws.

While this trend of lavish dowries promoted the development of Nijincai qi, it also had negative impacts on families and individuals. Some families delayed their daughters' marriages to prepare a substantial dowry, particularly those with multiple daughters. In extreme cases, families might even resort to infanticide to reduce expenses. Additionally, the pressure to maintain appearances led many families to deplete their assets, selling properties or incurring debt. Overall, the practice of extravagant dowries in the Ningbo and Shaoxing regions highlighted the heavy economic and psychological burdens faced by families, reflecting the profound influence of social, economic, and cultural factors on marriage customs.

4.2.3 Feudal Moral Constraints on Traditional Chinese Women

The Ningbo and Shaoxing regions, deeply influenced by Confucian culture, impose strict norms and expectations on women's morality, behavior, and cultivation, with "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" being the most typical and far-reaching. These norms not only shaped societal views but were also reflected in the everyday tools used, especially in mud-gold lacquerware, including various types of buckets.

The "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" refer to "obedience to the father before marriage, to the husband after marriage, and to the son after the husband's death," and "virtue, speech, appearance, and work." These principles were communicated to women through practical items. For example, buckets were used by women to carry food to their husbands, serving both a practical and symbolic purpose, reminding women of their duty to care for and respect their husbands. Items like milk buckets and fertility buckets symbolized women's reproductive responsibilities, emphasizing the importance of producing male heirs. The belief that "of the three unfilial acts, having no descendants is the worst" highlighted the critical nature of reproduction, and women who failed to bear children

often faced familial criticism. Moreover, grooming buckets and embroidery buckets reminded women to maintain their appearance and fulfill household duties.

The patterns on these lacquerware often feature themes of loyalty, filial piety, and female virtues, serving both decorative and instructional purposes. They were used to educate and remind women to adhere to their roles and maintain family harmony.

The functional transformation of mud-gold lacquerware before and after marriage goes beyond material display to encompass cultural education and the transmission of feudal ideology. During the wedding, the elaborate lacquerware showcased the family's wealth and status, while after marriage, these items served as tools for teaching women. This practice reinforced societal expectations of female roles and the family's adherence to traditional values. Each use of these items served as a reminder of women's responsibilities and societal expectations (Mao Liping, 2007), becoming a cultural link in perpetuating feudal moral teachings.

These lacquerware pieces not only display ancient craftsmanship but also transmit core Confucian values. Through their use, women were subtly educated in traditional values like loyalty, filial piety, and virtue. Therefore, mud-gold lacquerware became a key medium in perpetuating feudal moral teachings, educating and disciplining generations of women, and reinforcing family and societal expectations.

5. CONCLUSION AND FURTHER DISCUSSION

Mud-gold lacquerware plays an indispensable role in Ninghai wedding customs, with bucket-shaped lacquerware being particularly prominent. This study reveals the deep cultural significance of these items as gender symbols through their shapes and colors.

In terms of shape, the rounded and gentle characteristics of bucket-shaped lacquerware reflect traditional cultural expectations for female aesthetics and morality. The circular design symbolizes femininity, tenderness, and completeness, aligning with societal expectations of female virtues and family roles. The curves and lines of these buckets also echo society's pursuit of feminine beauty. In terms of color, red dominates these lacquerware pieces, symbolizing vitality, joy, and familial responsibilities in Chinese culture. Red not only adds a festive atmosphere to weddings but also conveys wishes for prosperity and harmony. The use of red reinforces the lacquerware's role as symbols of life and family.

The application and transformation of mud-gold lacquerware not only display material wealth but also transmit cultural and feudal ideologies. The use of these items in weddings reflects societal expectations of female roles and behavior. Analyzing these items provides insight into how material culture communicates and reinforces societal expectations of women.

Although this study provides insights into the gender symbolism of Ninghai mud-gold lacquerware, it has limitations. It focuses primarily on the Ninghai region, lacking comparative analysis with similar cultural phenomena in other areas. Different regions may have variations in shapes, colors, and customs, and future research should expand to include broader geographic comparisons. Additionally, there is a lack of systematic and detailed research on the classification of bucket-shaped lacquerware. Future studies could involve more diverse fieldwork and literature reviews to provide a deeper classification and analysis of these items, revealing their richer cultural meanings.

In summary, bucket-shaped mud-gold lacquerware in Ninghai wedding customs is significant not only for its material value but also for its profound cultural and social symbolism. By analyzing the shapes and colors of these items, we gain a deeper understanding of traditional societal expectations for women and how these expectations are transmitted and reinforced through material culture. Future research should broaden its scope to include different regions and historical contexts to comprehensively reveal the cultural value and transmission significance of mud-gold lacquerware.

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