

Spectacles and the Social Life in the Ming-Qing Period

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Abstract

Spectacles were invented in the West between 1270 and 1280 by a Venetian in Italy. It is said that during the Yuan Dynasty, the people in China were already using plain glasses, so called “ghost eyes”, to protect eyes. It is not until the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, were records found that the Chinese wore presbyopia eyeglasses. In the 1420s, Ming Emperor Xuan Zong once gave Hu Ying, the Secretary of the Ministry of Rites, a pair of presbyopia eyeglasses as a gift. Since then, there have been countless records of the use of presbyopia eyeglasses. Most of eyeglasses in China were imported from the Middle East before 1570. Importation of glasses from the southeast coast started, perhaps, from the 1570s. Since the beginning of the 17th century, people in Fu Jian and Guang Dong started to imitate the technology and make glasses. According to gazetteer, spectacles were already an item of local specialties of Haicheng County in Zhang-Zhou Province by the end of Ming Dynasty. Readers also found recurrently crystal eyeglasses in popular novels in Ming. Those eyeglasses first introduced into China in Ming Dynasty are single pieces with grips. Later, they were made into pairs framed in metal. In the late 16th century, users started to attach strings on the frames and tie them behind heads. Besides, there were two elderly men wearing glasses in the famous painting, *Nan Du Fan Hui Tu Juan*.

In the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, there were more glass makers such as

Chen Zhijing, Zhu Sheng, Sun Yuiqiao, Wu Zhenyu and Zhou Tianxin in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. The price of eyeglasses went down gradually due to great number of importers and producers. In the 1640's, a pair of presbyopia eyeglasses cost 4 or 5 liang of silver. By the 1660's, the price was only one tenth, about 0.5 or 0.6 liang of silver. Prices were still lower in the 1680's, each pair cost only 0.07 or 0.08 liang of silver. Sometime one could even buy one pair for only 0.02 or 0.03 liang of silver. Interestingly, despite the fact that glass-lenses have been introduced into China at the end of the Ming Dynasty, crystal lenses were more popular than their counterpart in Ching Dynasty. Zhangpu in Fujian, Guangzhou in Guangdong, Suzhou in Jiangsu were most famous for making crystal eyeglasses. The 18th century saw optical shops in the cities of Beijing, Suzhou, Guangzhou and Shanghai. There were even streets of optical in Suzhou and Guangzhou. The lane of Zhuanzhu in Suzhou city was most celebrated for the quality of eyeglasses in mid-Qing Dynasty. Products made in this area were exported as far as to Beijing. Technologically, the glasses worn in Qing Dynasty were not much different from the ones in late Ming Dynasty. Users hook spectacles behind the ears by silk threads or copper wires. But spectacles like these would press heavily on nose and ears. Besides, users needed to change spectacles in according to aging and worsening of presbyopia syndrome. But most shops offered no more than twelve options for presbyopia degrees. Chinese made glasses were not equipped with nose pads. Not until the late Qing Dynasty, were spectacles with nose pads introduced from abroad. They were much more comfortable and handy to wear. Eyeglasses with gold or silver frames became the vogue in Shanghai and other treaty ports. Toric lenses were also introduced at this time. With better clarity and less cost, Toric gradually replaced crystal lenses.

“Forty is the turning point for the eyes” is a popular saying in Qing Dynasty, meaning that one may start to suffer from presbyopia when he reaches forty years of age. After the turning point, purchasing and wearing eyeglasses became a part of life

for many people. People in China had peculiar attitude toward spectacles, however. First, they considered the lenses made of glass were harmful for eyes, while those of crystal harmless. They argued that glass was made and refined in the fire, so it had the character of fire harmful to the eyes. On the other hand, crystal had a character of the coolness harmless to the eyes. Such an argument, though perfectly congenial to Chinese mentality of five elements, was probably proposed to conceal insufficiency of Chinese knowledge of glassmaking. Consequentially, the price of crystal lenses has been higher than glass lenses since the beginning of Qing Dynasty. In terms of price among crystal lenses, the dark colored ones are the highest, the brown ones in the middle, and the transparent lowest. To many, wearing dark crystal glasses was a sumptuous presentation. The vogue was popular among men and women and did not die out till the end of Qing regime. Another unusual point of view of eyeglasses is that an elderly should not wear spectacles regularly, even though he did need them. Having worn eyeglasses regularly, one would be easily dominated by the glasses and could not live without them. Many people were affected by this idea, including Emperor Qianlong. For people with nearsightedness, it was believed that one should avoid wearing glasses at a young age, as his sight would become normal when older. This social concept might have worsened the nearsightedness. Western printing technologies were introduced into China in the late Qing which made books of small prints possible, which in turn contributed the worseness of nearsightedness in China. Actually, literacy and reading habits are closely related to nearsightedness, as demonstrated and verified in the sharp contrast between Jiangnan or Lower Yangtze Region and Northern China. Jiangnan Areas was more literal and had more people passing provincial civil service examinations; at the same time, the ratio of nearsightedness among the population in this region was probably the highest in the nation.

眼鏡與明清的社會生活

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摘要

在西方，義大利威尼斯人發明眼鏡，大約在西元 1270-1280 年之間。據說在元代時，中國人已經使用一種叫「鬼眼睛」的無度數遮目眼鏡。而資料確切記載中國人使用老花眼鏡，則在明朝初年。大約在西元 1420-1430 年代，明宣宗曾賜老花眼鏡給禮部尚書胡濙。自此以降，不乏官員使用老花眼鏡之記載。1570 年代以前，資料中所談到的眼鏡，主要來自西域（中亞）。明代人首次提到眼鏡來自東南沿海，大約在 1570 年左右。而在 17 世紀初，福建、廣東已有人仿製眼鏡。明末漳州府海澄縣的地方志記當地物產，甚至有眼鏡一項。明末小說也提及水晶眼鏡。明代眼鏡初傳入時，乃是有柄手持型，後來則是雙圓對稱，之間以金屬聯結，至十六世紀後期，已經出現使用者用絲線將其綁在腦後。除了文字記載之外，明末的《南都繁會圖卷》中，也繪有兩位老人戴著眼鏡。

進入清代以後，江浙地區亦出現仿製者，陳之京、諸昇、孫雲球、吳貞毓、周天行等，就是著名的例子。由於輸入與仿製者越來越多，價格日益便宜，1640 年代每副價值銀四、五兩的老花眼鏡，在 1660 年代約僅十分之一，即銀五、六錢；至 1680 年代則不過銀七、八分，甚至有二、三分一副者。有趣的是，玻璃眼鏡雖在明末已經傳入，但清代流行的卻是水晶眼鏡，其產地以福建的漳浦、廣東的廣州、江蘇的蘇州最為有名。18 世紀以後，北京、蘇州、廣州、上海等城市還出現了眼鏡舖，蘇州、廣州甚至有眼鏡街，其中蘇州專諸巷所製的眼鏡，在清中葉更享有盛名，並行銷至北京等地。清代人所戴的眼鏡，與晚明的差別不大，均是繫上絲線，或綁上銅錢，勾掛在耳朵上。這種眼鏡戴起來沉重，常造成鼻子與耳朵的負擔。而且，隨著年齡變化，須不斷配置不同度數的眼鏡。但店家所提供的眼鏡，大約祇有十二種

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度數。中國的眼鏡一向無腳，直至清末才傳進有腳的眼鏡，使用起來輕便許多。另外，新式金絲、銀絲鏡框眼鏡在上海等通商口岸也大行其道。而 Toric 鏡片也在這時期傳入，價格便宜而且清晰，傳統的水晶眼鏡漸漸被取代。

清人有「四十為眼關」之說，指的是眼睛開始老花。當此之際，不少人開始選購眼鏡配戴。但社會上對於戴眼鏡卻有某些特別的觀點，其一即玻璃損目、水晶無害之說。其說法是：玻璃係經過火冶鍊而成，帶有火性，足以傷眼，不像水晶性涼，不致損目。而在這個觀念的背後，可能與中國工匠無法掌握眼鏡玻璃的製造技術，故製造出這一符合中國思維方式的說法。這也就造了自清初以來水晶眼鏡的價格，一直高於玻璃眼鏡。而在水晶眼鏡之中，又以墨色最貴，茶色次之，白色者最為便宜。後來，社會上還出現戴墨晶眼鏡炫耀之風，迄至清末，即使女性亦然。另一個特別的觀點，則是老花眼鏡雖是老人所須，但儘量不要常戴，因為戴了之後就被其所控制，爾後便不能不戴。包括乾隆皇帝在內，許多人都受到這種觀念影響。對於近視者而言，也認為年輕近視最好也以不要戴，老了眼睛就正常了。這種社會觀點，可能造成近視者度數更為加深。晚清西式印刷技術傳入後，由於印刷書體太小，造成讀者近視日甚。實際上，識字率與閱讀習慣與近視的關係頗深，關外與江南地區就是明顯的對比，後者向以文人多、中舉多著稱，其近視率可能也是全國最高的。