

Comparison of aesthetic styles of decorative combs in Japan and China

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### บทคัดย่อ

ตั้งแต่สมัยโบราณ หวีได้มีความเกี่ยวข้องกับชีวิตความเป็นอยู่ของคนทั่วไป ในฐานะที่เป็นเครื่องมือจัดทรงผม หวีได้สื่อถึงแนวคิด ฟังก์ชัน ความงามศิลปะ ทั้งทางวัฒนธรรม สังคม ค่านิยม และประเพณี บทความนี้หวังจะทำให้คนทั่วไปกลับหันมาสนใจ ภูมิปัญญาโบราณที่สืบทอดมา ในฐานะที่เป็นคนออกแบบเครื่องตกแต่ง หวีได้สื่อถึงเนื้อหาประวัติศาสตร์ในสังคมที่มีรูปแบบหลากหลาย สื่อผ่านรูปทรง วัสดุและการเปลี่ยนแปลงในแต่ละช่วงเวลา มีรูปแบบ ลวดลายเส้นในวัฒนธรรมของตน บทความนี้จึงได้ใช้การเปรียบเทียบระหว่างหวีจีนและหวีญี่ปุ่นผ่านรูปภาพแต่ละยุค ทั้งนี้ ผลการวิเคราะห์ความสัมพันธ์ภายในของวัฒนธรรมเครื่องประดับหวี สะท้อนมิติของจิตวิญญาณ ที่มีความหมาย รูปทรงเฉพาะ ความงามทางศิลปะที่แตกต่างกัน

**คำสำคัญ:** รูปแบบหวี รูปทรง การเปรียบเทียบ จีน ญี่ปุ่น

### Abstract

The comb has been closely related to people's life. As a universal utensil, it conveys different social culture, values, the concept, function and aesthetics that are given by the demand of courtesy. It aims at looking back and paying attention to traditional spirit. As an object with decorative function, it includes multi-level social and historical content through its own shape, material, and pattern changes. This paper mainly starts from the shape change of Japanese and Chinese combs, combines related pictures, and makes an analysis on the intrinsic link between Chinese and Japanese comb culture as well as their different cultural characteristics and aesthetic spirit.

**Key words :** comb form, shape, aesthetic characteristics, China, Japan

## Background & Rationale

Comb has a long history and important status in all the nationalities. It conveys abundant cultural contents with its unique forms. Comb is a common thing, but through the comparison between Japan's and China's different aesthetic appreciation of decorating combs, we can also discovered the development of human beings material culture from a special aspect. This article there are 4 main issues. 1) Search in historical study on functions of comb and the background which produces the aesthetic functions of comb. 2) The evolving history of Japanese combs 3) The Evolving History of Chinese Comb. 4) Aesthetic comparison between Japanese and Chinese combs. The development of Japanese decorating combs and those of Chinese to conclude as the patterns of the changes in Japanese combs and Chinese combs.

### Part1 : The history of comb

The Chinese word for comb is “梳篦”. “梳” has two parts. One part “木” means wood. It implies the materials used to make comb is wood. The other part is “流”, which stands for the shape of the comb and implies “smooth” (Figure:1) In Japanese, “梳” is written as “櫛”, in which the part “木” and “竹” stand for wood and bamboo, which imply the materials used to make the comb are wood or bamboo. (Picture 1)



(Figure:1) The ancient character of the Chinese word “梳” (comb)

Comb is the tool used to brush hairs. It's an ancient handicraft work usually shaped flat with many teeth.

Comb with thinner teeth is called “梳”, used to brush hair. Comb with thicker teeth is called “篦”, used to clean hair. Brushing and cleaning hair is one of the common activities for people's good-looking. Comb has two parts: the upper parts is a “hand handle” which is called “the back of a comb”. The lower part is teeth, and the empty parts between the teeth are called teeth gaps. Made of bones, wood, bamboo, horns, or ivories, etc, combs are necessities for the ancient people, especially for women, who barely leave their combs away from themselves. (Figure:2)



(Figure:2) Comb making

Source : <http://sns.91ddcc.com/t/103173> (2016. August)

Comb has three major functions. First is to brush hair. As a basic function. Mr. Wang Renxiang (1950-), an archaeologist, believes the original combs are made by imitating human hands out of people's need to brush and fix hair [1]. Second, comb is used as amulet and ritual tool. Most nationalities which keep the customs of pinching combs in the hair referring to tales about the customs. Edward Bernard Tyler (1832-1917), claims Animism, he believe the primitive men see nonliving objects, including combs, had spiritual power and were super-natural existence. Behavioral ritualists, represented by James Frazer (1854-1941), otherwise thinks the primitive men regarded the head as a sacred part and god or spirit would afflict to the head. Many

nationalities have “faith of knot”, for example, some of them regarded the knots as amulets. Likewise, updoing the hair to a bun is like making a knot with hair. Plus, they think after touching something, you are attached to it even when you are away with it (like touching the witchcraft). So, the primitive men updid the hair and pinched the comb in the hair to fulfill the purpose of keeping the gods on their head. They believed the comb that once touched the head could drive away beasts and insects and to bury it with the dead men, it could even protect dead men’s spirits [2]. Lastly, the comb develops from the tool for brushing hair to become a decorating ornaments, and thus lead to the mode of pinching it in the hair. With the teeth of the comb pinched in and the back of the comb outside of the hair, the comb can fix the hair and fulfill the need for decoration and aesthetics at the same time. In ancient oriental countries, women put much emphasis on decorating the hair with combs.

## Part 2 : The evolving history of Japanese combs

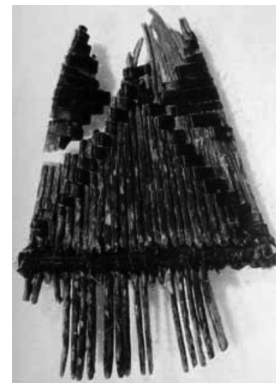
Japanese people used combs in Jomon era, 6,000 years ago. Both Aomori Temple Middens and Fukui Prefecture Bird Marina Middens have unearthed carved straight comb over this period, and straight bone comb with five teeth, straight xiu Zhu Wood comb with eight teeth and so on. Otaru endure road soil field also unearthed the wooden comb with tangled teeth in that same period of time. And Miyagi Fen Jin Middens, unearthed a late jomon age clay golem which shows the comb style at that time. Before late jomon era (12000 BC - 300 BC), to the earlier yayoi era (in 300B. C.–100 B.C.) and middle yayoi era (in 100 B.C.–100 A.D.), combs were mainly straight knot-shaped combs. Numerous Triple county site and Ishikawa prefecture site have unearthed these types of comb. And the straight comb sawed and carved from the whole piece of wood

prevailed in the late yayoi era. They had more paint, long shapes and thin teeth. Toward the middle and later periods of Era of Great Tombs, straight palm-shaped and horseshoe-shaped combs were popular. In the later era, both the way of pinching combs and the shapes of the combs were influenced by Chinese styles. Typical western Han style horseshoe combs, combs unearthed eight inches under Ise battery city reflects the styles of decorating combs at that period. The comb then developed from vertical to horizontal. (Figure: 3-5)



(Figure:3) straight painted comb with tangled teeth. Earlier yayoi era (in 300B. C. – 100B. C.)

Source : <http://data.book.hexun.com/chapter-2169-7-1.shtml> (2016. August)



(Figure:4) Straight comb with tangled teeth. Middle yayoi era (in 100 B. C. – 100 A.D.) unearthed in Ishikawa Prefecture  
Source : <http://data.book.hexun.com/chapter-2169-7-1.shtml> (2016. August)



(Figure:5) Straight comb with engraved teeth, later yayoi era  
(about 100 A.D. to 200 A.D.)

Source : <http://data.book.hexun.com/chapter-2169-7-1.shtml>  
(2016. August)

In Nara age, Japanese clothes, ornaments, and articles were all under the influence of Chinese Sui and Tang Dynasty, including the combs. From Heian period to Azuchi-Momoyama period, Japanese women favored long straight hair, so they barely use combs for decoration. The decorating combs in this era were for the sacrifice in the shrine, represented by 25 combs designed in plum blossoms figures owned by Hōjō Masako, principle wife of Minamoto no Yoritomo. Most common combs used to brush hair were small semicircle ones made of boxwood, without any designs. It's called "Pill comb" The upper-class ladies and the female officials who accompanied the Emperor of Japan to have meals also used combs similar to painted Maki-e. Later, developed from pill combs, there were "leftover comb" with triangle handle and "peignes" with widened handle [2].

Hair buns prevailed from Edo period, and reached a peak when women decorated their hair with combs in Japanese history. Most turtle shell combs were imported from abroad in Edo period. The combs were crystal and the price was expensive. Many famous ladies competed with their turtle shell combs which

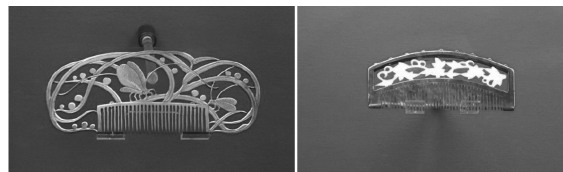
some in great qualities could even worth some gold. The geishas in Kyoto always pinched 1.5 centimeters long comb in their buns. Rich ladies and Natsuki geishas could pinch as much as three or five combs. To Kyōhō dynasty, common-class women also prevails with pinching combs. The Ukiyoes that time have many female images with combs. (Figure:6-7)



(Figure:6-7) Ancient Japanese way of pinching the comb.

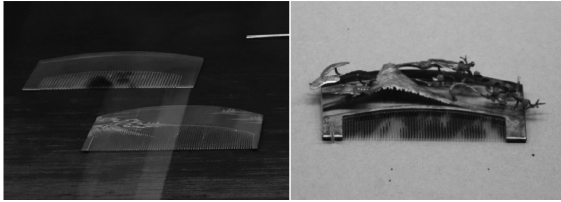
Source : [http://www.360doc.com/content/14/0421/14/253213\\_370827796.shtml](http://www.360doc.com/content/14/0421/14/253213_370827796.shtml) (2016. August)  
<http://www.waxinxian.com/1314.html> (2016. August)

Till later Edo period (1603 A.D. -1867 A.D.), there were various styles of combs made of different materials, like wood, ivory, metal, hawksbill, ox horn, ox toenail. The designs on the comb included plain pictures, Ukiyoes, golds or silvers. The sculpture styles on the back of the comb were abundant, including flowers and grass, people, animals, stories, sceneries, and daily necessities. Common women pinched combs with sculptures and prostitutes usually pinched hawksbill combs. [2] (Figure: 8-12)



(Figure: 8-9) Edo period combs

Combs in Edo period, shoot in Kyoto National Museum.

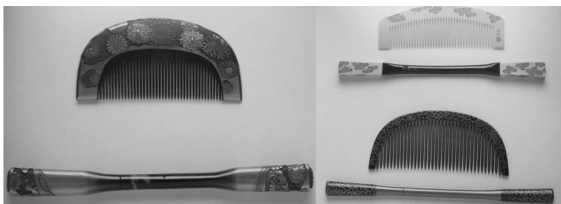


(Figure: 10-11) Edo period combs  
Combs in Edo period, shoot in Kyoto National Museum.



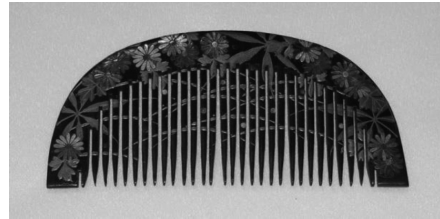
(Figure:12) Edo combs  
Source : Okazaki Collection: Combs and Ornamental Hairpins

In Meiji period (1868-1911) Japanese combs developed towards curved shapes, and the teeth became “full” and “thinner” style. (Figure: 13-15)



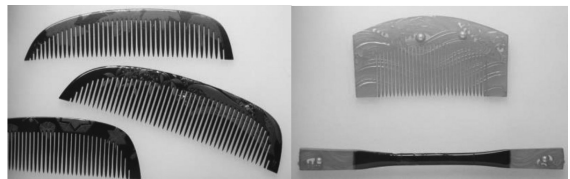
(Figure: 13-15) In Meiji period Japanese combs  
Source : Okazaki Collection: Combs and Ornamental Hairpins

After Meiji Reform, people began to imitate western hairdos. Combs changed with this trend and became simple and made of horse or ox toenails instead of expensive and precious hawksbill. And plastic celluloid combs prevailed and produced in Japan. (Figure:16)



(Figure:16) Meiji and Taisho Period wooden comb  
Source : <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kushi.jpg>  
(2016. August)

There are two types of Japanese combs nowadays, bun combs and horizontal combs. Bun combs, according to the traditional Japanese bun hairdos, include ear lock comb, knot comb, double comb and so on. Horizontal combs are used as decoration and daily brushing. [2] (Figure: 17-18)



(Figure:17) Combs in Showa period (1926 A.D. -1989 A.D.)  
Source : Okazaki Collection: Combs and Ornamental Hairpins



(Figure:18) Its modern Japanese maki-e  
Source : <http://www.mucai.org.cn/Poplar/article.htm?projectID=cn1110240007> (2016. August)

### Part 3 : The Evolving History of Chinese Comb

The history of combs in China can be traced back to the late Neolithic period. There are two pieces of rotten ivory comb unearthed in a tomb in Tai'an Dawenkou, Ningyang County, Shandong Province of China in 1959, about 6,000 years ago (late Neolithic), in a vertical rectangle, with 5 long and thick teeth. [9] (Figure:19)



(Figure:19) Ivory comb unearthed from Majiabang cultural relics 6000 years ago

Source : [http://news.cang.com/info/212051\\_1.html](http://news.cang.com/info/212051_1.html)  
(2016. September)

A lot of jade combs were found in tombs of Liangzhu cultural ruins. Their basic characteristics were on a trapezoidal shape and some were in a wing-like shape. Some were with a plain face while some were engraved with God's or animal's face or geometric pattern. There were also combs unearthed in a similar period in Dawenkou cultural sites, such as an 8-character pattern ivory comb unearthed in Shandong Tai'an Dawenkou Baotou Village. These combs and comb backs have a hole, which can be used to wear tethers and lash other decorations, reflecting the functional requirements of worshipping sprite and wearing comb. From the Warring States Period to the Wei and Jin

Dynasties, China was popular with horseshoe-shaped comb. Combs in this style were also found in Western Regions, the basic shape of which is semi-round comb back and square comb teeth. Horseshoe-shaped combs before Qin and Han Dynasties often had a series of holes, which can be worn. After Qin and Han Dynasties, it was popular to pack the comb with bags or boxes, and then it was rare to see a hole on the comb. [9] Combs in Han Dynasty are in a longer horseshoe-shape, decorated with cloud-based pattern, and feathered birds and beasts. (Figure:20)



(Figure: 20) Bone Comb in Warring States Period

Source : [http://news.cang.com/info/212051\\_1.html](http://news.cang.com/info/212051_1.html)  
(2016. September)

Placing a comb into the hair began in Southern Dynasties and prevailed in Tang Dynasty. Women in Tang Dynasty thought decorative hair was beautiful to form a high bun. Comb is a necessary tool for hair buns, coupled with popular hair ornaments. Tang Dynasty was prevailed with half-moon shaped combs, the materials of which were also more diverse, mostly wood or bamboo as well as precious metals, like gold, silver, copper and tin, made of metal sheet, or ivory, rhinoceros horns, and tortoise shell. It was decorated with shells, crystal, glass, and jade beads. [3] (Figure : 21-22)



(Figure: 21-22) Portrait of Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes and Dress of Tang Dynasty  
 Picture is from Ancient Chinese Gold and Silver Jewelry by Yang Zhi shui (1954-)

Combs in Tang Dynasty was horseshoe-shaped, with a slightly wider part in the bottom. The most typical way to put a comb into the hair toward a front of the forehead hair. There are also other ways to put combs, like two combs one up and one down, or two combs up or down at the same time or only one comb. Some people will insert many small combs in the hair to create variations. Patterns of the comb are mostly borrowed from the bronze mirror in Tang Dynasty. (Figure:23-29) Complex and gorgeous pattern theme includes fairy; beautiful butterfly around flowers, phoenix; mandarin duck; and lotus. [3]



(Figure: 23-28) Tang Dynasty comb  
 Pictures are from Ancient Chinese Gold and Silver Jewelry by Yang Zhishui (1954-)





(Figure: 29) Combs in Tang Dynasty Collected by Mr. Kang Yuchun (1966-) in Yunnan Personal Museum, Photo taken by the author (2017. April)

In Song and Yuan Dynasties, there was not a lot of combs made of pure gold and silver. Instead, more comb backs and combs were made of different materials. Decorative part was made of precious metals, and teeth part was made of wood. Ancient people had developed a clear sense of using material properly, ensuring the aesthetic needs of decoration and reasonable use of expensive materials. [3] (Figure: 30)

Popular comb style in Song and Yuan Dynasties were rainbow-shaped type. Some were decorated in both side and some were only decorated in the back of the comb. Comb shape in Song Dynasty were transforming from wide and flat horseshoe into a semicircle, and comb back and teeth from narrow shape to crescent shape. Connection between comb back and teeth were transforming from up and down into comb back half containing comb teeth. Decorative style carried the one in Tang Dynasty-carefully crafts, but the overall style took on an elegant and simple style. [3] (Figure:31-32)



(Figure: 30)



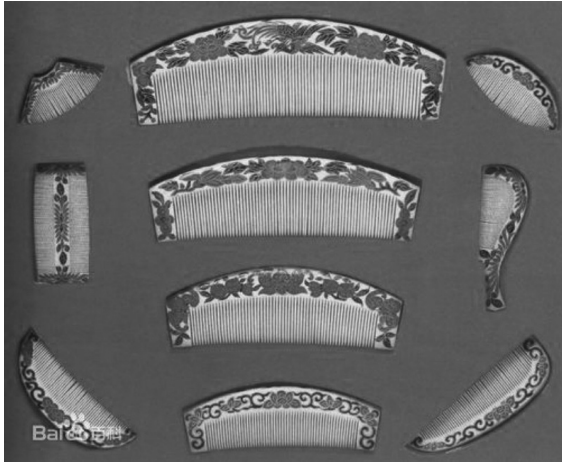
(Figure: 31-32) Song dynasty comb  
Pictures are from Ancient Chinese Gold and Silver Jewelry by Yang Zhi shui (1954-)

Yuan Dynasty in China is a dynasty built on the back of horse. Their simple and plain grassland character is also reflected in the made of comb, forming its own unique flavor of the times and national style. [9] (Figure:33)



(Figure: 33) Gold Wooden Comb in Yuan Dynasty  
Source : [http://news.cang.com/info/201207/212051\\_3.html](http://news.cang.com/info/201207/212051_3.html)  
(2016. September)

In Ming and Qing Dynasties, comb has gradually lost its decorative function, and has developed with a social influence and changes. Complex combs were designed for the purpose of social grade and distinction of functional use. Different shapes of combs had different combing effect. Long arched comb was for large area combing hair; medium crescent comb was for combing both sides and dovetail; a small shape comb was for combing hair tip; fine two-sided comb can be used to get rid of the scalp dirt. Different combs have their own duties. All kinds of materials and decorative techniques tend to be complete. [3][9] (Figure:34)



(Figure: 34) The comb of the Qing Dynasty

Source: [http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=Mwj01YWcMpG-fyob-42yOknLn7aQckoQXSEPNdpr80s\\_1goB7WpFrTa0divgLCZfKXt-8KZWDD-fUx3isem53nWMBnrKzHrZkYbJ3RLDLic3](http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=Mwj01YWcMpG-fyob-42yOknLn7aQckoQXSEPNdpr80s_1goB7WpFrTa0divgLCZfKXt-8KZWDD-fUx3isem53nWMBnrKzHrZkYbJ3RLDLic3)  
(2016. September)

Throughout the development of decorative combs in China, presently, it seems to have lost its popularity in ancient times. Because decorative combs have disappeared from people's daily life. Apart from high-end goods with some collection value, there have been few exquisite combs in ordinary people's life.

#### Part 4 : Aesthetic comparison between Japanese and Chinese combs.

From earlier functional combs to later decorating combs, the need for decoration also shows the rise of hierarchy. The trend is always led by the nobilities. Japanese combs develop from exquisite to simple, along with the extends of tradition. Chinese combs develop from luxurious to elaborate, and then are no longer used as daily decoration.

Along the time, Japanese comb forms its own special and unique design style. First, it is thin and small and put emphasis on the beauty of simple and plain. Second, it shows the aesthetic view of “quiet and deserted”, which pursues the beauty of quiet elegance. Japan loves mysterious and elegance beauties, implicit, distant and obscure.

The horseshoe-shaped combs influenced Japanese combs a lot. And Japanese combs developed exquisite structures with tangled and dimensional designs. The views of “quiet” and “crystal” were embodied in the combs. The emphasis on the shape of the combs along the development was also very obvious. The decoration on the Japanese combs were often irregular. The materials were often paints embedded with other ingredients to reach an exquisite style. Dense

Time	Japan			China		
	Modeling	Use	Style	Modeling	Use	Style
About 4000 BC - the first century BC	Vertical horseshoe shape	Comb the hair	Comb teeth long and thick	Vertical horseshoe shape	Comb the hair	Comb teeth long and dense
The 1 <sup>st</sup> century AD - the end of the third century AD				Semi-round comb back with long horseshoe shape	Comb the hair 、 Fixed hair crown 、 decoration	Carved exquisite
				Semi-round comb back with vertical long horseshoe-shaped, comb back gradually wide flat, comb teeth slightly sparse	Comb the hair 、 Fixed hair crown 、 decoration	Simple and neat

Time	Japan			China		
	Modeling	Use	Style	Modeling	Use	Style
At the beginning of the 4 <sup>th</sup> century AD - the end of the 6 <sup>th</sup> century AD				Horseshoe-shaped, half-moon	Comb the hair 、 Fixed hair 、 decoration	Beautiful and dense, hair is the heyday of the comb
	Semi-circular, triangular	Comb the hair 、 Fixed hair 、 decoration				
The beginning of the 7 <sup>th</sup> century AD - the end of the 9 <sup>th</sup> century AD						
The beginning of the 10 <sup>th</sup> century AD - the end of the 12 <sup>th</sup> century						
				Horseshoe-shaped, half-moon, rainbow-shaped	Comb the hair 、 Fixed hair 、 decoration	Gradually elegant
				rainbow-shaped	Comb the hair 、 decoration	Simple and elegant
The beginning of the 13 <sup>th</sup> century - the end of the 15 <sup>th</sup> century AD				Horseshoe-shaped, half-moon, rainbow-shaped Fish-shaped, trapezoidal	Comb the hair, No longer popular combing decoration	
The beginning of the 16 <sup>th</sup> century - the end of the 18 <sup>th</sup> century AD	Square round, rainbow-shaped, half-moon, irregular shape,	Comb the hair 、 Fixed hair 、 decoration	Stereo elegance, decorative comb development of the peak			
The beginning of the 19 <sup>th</sup> century AD - the end of the 20 <sup>th</sup> century AD	Half moon, rainbow, long moon shape	Comb the hair 、 Fixed hair 、 decoration	Simple and delicate			

(Figure: 35) Japan China comb form, use development comparison chart

Chinese combs evolves with the changes of dynasties. The styles are more like luxurious, full, heavy and balanced. Horseshoe-shaped combs were the most popular ones. Later, with the prevailing trend of

“rainbow bridge-shaped” combs in Song dynasty, the visual feeling of “round” and “full” is continued. Most of the decoration is continuous or symmetrical pictures which show the “moderation” in Chinese culture.

With the ways of pinching combs in the hair in these two countries developing from similar ways into different ones, the shapes of the combs also became different. Japanese combs become hair decoration, matched with hairpins. Chinese combs then gradually used as decoration. Nowadays, Chinese ways of making the combs that lead to a need to protect its use by the Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists.

## Conclusion

The development of Japanese and Chinese combs was not single linear and conventional. Because of the unique historical and cultural backgrounds, from jade combs to carved combs to luxurious engraved combs, Japanese combs absorb the essence of foreign cultures along its evolving history and reach its own styles. The shapes, crafts and materials change to fit in the new need of social and cultural development.

China has its own deep cultural root and diversified aesthetics. In the future, China need to combine traditions and modern styles together, based on the historical background and our present situation, demolishing cultural gaps, for a better development.

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