

The Development of Female Clothing during the Imperial Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD)

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Abstract

The Tang Dynasty represents a golden age for China's history, during which trade, arts, finance, and science were greatly favored. Specifically, trading and cultural exchanges with neighboring countries, but also more distant ones gradually became closer and more frequent. The emperors of this dynasty were open to new socio-political ideas and practices, to other religions and cultures and particularly favored the social status of women. The design of clothing of that period, especially women's, was the mirror of these important changes and constituted perhaps their most representative and imaginative narrative. This research aims to discuss and comment on the effect of these new sociopolitical and cultural conditions on the formation of the different types of women's clothing that appeared at that time, which, inter alia, was a landmark in the further development of the national Chinese clothing, but also of China's neighboring countries, both from an aesthetic and social point of view.

Keywords: *China, Tang Dynasty, Dress, Social Classes, Women, Tradition*

Introduction

After four centuries of national disasters, interpreted in barbarian invasions, mass movements of populations, and the fragmentation of the empire into several, smaller kingdoms, in the 7th century AD, China would experience the glory and majesty of the Tang Dynasty. For East Asia culture this would signify a real Renaissance with the main characteristics being the consolidation and expansion of the Chinese state, the prosperity of the urban population and the enormous wealth of the ruling class, the flourishing of literature, poetry, sciences and fine and performing arts. This ideal new status quo would be maintained for two more centuries, while the West was virtually ignorant of the existence of the largest country in the world. The only contact of the Europeans with the distant, unknown, mysterious Chinese wonder was through the trade caravans, which at the altar of profit and with great patience marched through the vast deserts of Central Asia, with the aim of selling western products to China and bring Chinese products back to their countries. Some

other trading groups, mainly from India, had long before introduced Buddhism into the Chinese Empire, which was to become the main religion of the Chinese in the following centuries. This happened as the new religion was immediately adopted mainly by the popular strata, which provoked the strong reaction of radical Chinese Confucianists, and quickly became the most important opponent of Confucianism. At that time it was unthinkable for Westerners to know, much less to recognize, the elegance, beauty, wealth and unimaginable prosperity and abundance of the Chinese major cities such as the capital Chang'an, and to compare it with European major cities with corresponding power and glamor during their prime. Nor could anyone know its vast cultivated lands and its bustling ports in which tons of products of all kinds were daily imported and exported. During that era, the citizens of the wealthy classes of feudal China used to live in high-rise buildings elaborately made. Most of them looked like real works of art, with their facades covered in reliefs and other beautiful, detailed ornaments. Their

interiors were equally taken care of, with their finely crafted furniture, embroidered fabrics and wonderfully made porcelain ware (Karzis 2000: 43).

Jewelry was a key element in the dress of women, as well as men of the upper social strata as they were considered symbols of wealth and power. In many cases men would deliberately stir and shake their buckles, bracelets, and other fancy ornaments, so that they would jingle and arouse the attention and admiration of passers-by. Their chariots were luxurious and impressive, decorated with gold patterns, while their horses were well-groomed and heavily ornamented.

Silk, a precious commodity unknown to the West, had become so common in Chinese cities that even the middle classes wore it. Byzantium, which was the first to be informed of its existence, soon acquired it through the famous Silk Road, and quickly thereafter channeled it throughout Western Europe (Karzis 2014: 28).

In the Chinese chronicles of the time, it is emphasized that women began to be socially upgraded, having ceased to be treated as property or commodities for the rich, gradually gaining the same social rights as men. Within this new social and moral context, grooming began to play a primary role. Women's vanity and coquetry focused on the care of the face and especially on the headdress which surpassed all previous types. The most popular hairstyle of the time was shaped in such a way as to cover the temples, but also the outline of women's faces. Another ordinary hairstyle was the bun paired with a large bamboo hat (Leed 1996: 45). A common make-up practice was to paint their foreheads with dark yellow powder, while often using dark blue dye to paint their eyebrows intensively.

The application of various painted patterns on the forehead was also popular. Usually an interesting flower pattern, made of camellia seeds combined

with gold leaf and other precious materials, was drawn between the eyebrows. In this beautification context, their clothes, combined with their jewelry, were shaped accordingly to highlight the beauty, the charm, but also the high social class to which they belonged. In contrast, the middle class female population wore no more than two layers of clothing, however quite loose and wide-sleeved, while the poor wore cotton, linen or woolen simple trousers and shirts. Likewise for the numerous patterns and designs, as well as the variety of colors, the upper strata of the female population wore brightly colored clothing that caught the eye, while the lower strata chose dark, dull colors.

Characteristic Types of Women's Clothing

As we can guess during the imperial Tang Dynasty, clothing was not just a simple way to cover up, but a new way of fashion expression with several connotations. Clothing could clearly signify a person's social class, culture, political ideas and profession. It was also treated as a piece of art itself as it could host several craft and art practices, such as embroidering, weaving and dyeing. Being, several times, the melting pot of various cultures from other countries and peoples. Women's clothing in particular consisted of different top and bottom pieces. For instance, the upper body comprised of underwear, shirts, gowns, half-arms, shawls, etc., with different head ornaments, such as flowers, hairpins, etc. The lower body comprised of loose or tight trousers, comfortable skirts, as well as boots, shoes and belts, etc.

The role of the lower class women during this particular era differed from the role of women who belonged to higher classes. Although they had gained more social privileges and rights, they were not really required to attend various formal occasions and this was also evident through their clothing code. But in general their position was more elevated

compared to the women of the corresponding classes of the older dynasties. By and large, their clothes were simpler in structure compared to men's which were complex and with a lot of symbolism. At the same time, however, the broad production of silk and the flexible social policy and by extension the open popular profile of the Tang Dynasty gave many more and interesting options to the women of this class who often liked to wear men's clothes. This was in stark contrast to what happened both before and after the Tang Dynasty, when the ruling class considered it shameful for women, taken as inferior human beings, to wear men's clothing. Over time, however, this habit became a particularly popular fashion in China and became an important feature of female clothing of that period. It is interesting to consider the reasons why women started wearing men's clothes. The first reason was purely practical as during that time women needed to ride horses mainly to take part in various social activities, to carry merchandise or to travel long distances (Chen 2022). Under these circumstances, women, who were dressed in traditional costumes, found it very inconvenient and impractical to ride on the horsebacks, which turned their attention to the more comfortable men's clothing (Chen 2019: 198).

Another reason was the gradual influx of political representatives, foreign students, merchants and travelers to the capital of the empire, which was a great commercial and cultural center. Thus, their different, cross-cultural costumes with their distinctive designs, colors and fabrics that flooded Chang'an created a new, powerful dress culture, significantly influencing the formation of men and women clothing of both high and middle class during the Tang Dynasty.

In addition, women adopted the Hu, an attractive military uniform for men in previous dynasties, which became one of the most famous dress styles of the

time. These clothes were characterized by tight, long sleeves, long and also tight pant legs and fitted short tops. They were mainly combined with impressive accessories such as high leather boots, and impressive, wide belts.

Other types of clothing worn by middle class women were a combination of different garments such as *banbi*, which stands for a, usually U-shaped, waistcoat with short sleeves, and *shanqun*, which means a skirt and shirt ensemble. *Banbi*'s short sleeves would cover the shoulder area and was generally worn outside of a long sleeve shirt. Its length of the sleeve was somewhere between the vest and the long sleeve and functioned as a vest. Because of its popularity this garment was gradually adopted from Central Asian cultures through the frequent Silk Road cultural exchanges and was renamed as *beizi* during the late Tang Dynasty (Kim 1997: 174).

The Traditional *Ruqun* Garment and the *Hezi* Undergarment

The traditional *ruqun* attire was a typical Central China clothing, inherited and developed further by Tang women, mainly by ladies with titles of nobility or even female attendants who served in high class, important families including the royal family. It comprised of a top jacket, a long gown and a skirt on the bottom in different types, such as the *bainiao skirt*, decorated with feathers of many types of birds, and the graceful bell skirt, ornamented with twelve small bells at its four corners (Ding, 2016: 499).

However, the most important innovation on the clothing was its deeply opened up, bold collar which revealed a part of the female breast, which was a rather unusual issue in the past, when female clothing was designed according to the strict Confucian rules. However, the new order of things in Tang Dynasty China allowed, mainly higher class women to proceed in such bold design alterations

which enhanced the female sexuality and emancipation. The attires of this period have strong, attractive colors the most popular of which were different tones of green, deep purple, bright pomegranate and dark red.

Ruqun was combined with several accessories such as the well-known *banbi*, the cape, which was wide and short in length, normally draped over the one shoulder of the woman and the *pibo*, a type of narrow and long scarf, usually with embroidered motifs, draping from back to front. When women wore the traditional type of *ruqun*, didn't use to wear hats. However, they would cover their faces with a veil or ornate their heads with flowers.



Figure 1 Female Statuettes in *Tanlinruqun* Attire, Early Tang Dynasty

Source: Cernuschi_Museum

Another type of the *ruqun* garment, the evolution of which we can see through paintings as well as sculptures dating back to the early Tang Dynasty, is the *tanlinruqun* which consists of the following parts: a long, usually high-waisted, plain or striped skirt, a long-sleeved collared shirt, and a *banbi*. This type could be worn with various accessories such as the *pibo* shawl, various traditional Chinese hats, as well as foreign-influenced hats such as the *mili*, a burqa-like hat, the *weimao*, a hat with a wide brim and a veil hanging down to the shoulder, and the *fumao*, a big veiled hat. (Watt 2004: 291).

As undergarments had always been considered intimate clothes, they were decorated with embroidered patterns showing, in a way, the wearer's privacy and personal expressive taste. According to the way they were made, decorated and stylized they could also reveal the cultural and ideological standards of each era they belonged to (Wu 2010: 101). Just before the Tang period, undergarments had a classic style which dictated straps on the shoulders; nevertheless, in Tang Dynasty, a totally unconventional strapless, upper undergarment type appeared which reflected the new social ideas and norms, the so-called *hezi*. According to the legend, it was invented by one of the Four Beauties of China, Yang, who was also one of Emperor Xuanzong's spouses. She was having an affair with General An Lu Shan and after one of their intimate encounters her breast was left with a small bruise which she covered with a piece of embroidered cloth so that the Emperor would not be able to see it and suspect her of cheating (Ling, 2012).



Figure 2 Redhezi Garment, Late Tang Dynasty

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hezi_\(clothing\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hezi_(clothing))

Known also as 'waxiong (抹胸)', 'moxiong (抹胸)', 'lanqun (襌裙)', and 'hehuanlanqun (合欢襌裙)', this underwear did not have a definite shape, as it was made of strong, stiff, slightly elastic fabric and could be either curved, straight or rectangular in shape, with a raised front in the center.

It could be also adjusted according to the characteristics of women's outer garments, especially of *ruqun*. When they wore this particular outfit, they could improvise by tying the skirt high, almost below the bust, with a wide impressive, usually cloth belt. In this case the shoulders, the back and the upper bust were left covered only by a charming, transparent fabric which allowed *hezi* to appear as well, somehow becoming a part of the wearer's overall appearance. According to Wu (2010: 103) *hezi's* flexibility, mainly because of its elasticity, allowed women to take it on and off without the need for a closure, so it did not have any buttons.

The Hufu Clothes

As already mentioned, women in the Tang period had the freedom to choose clothing which carried significant influences from other cultures. This was another element of the independence and egalitarianism of the Tang emperors' way of governing. Thus the *hufu-type* clothing carried significant influences from Tatar clothing, even elements from Indian and Persian dresses, decorative motifs and unprecedented, new materials, such as different forms of threads, fabrics, buttons, etc. In general, the most common clothing of this type consisted of a fitted long robe decorated with complex patterns that had a front fastening, a turn-down collar, long trousers and was paired with a leather belt, a hat and high-heeled shoes. However, in the middle of the dynasty it became less popular, when the width of the sleeve became larger, exceeding 1.3 meters and ordinary females could not afford to buy so much cloth to make large-sleeved garments. That was the time that a sharp distinction between the higher and lower social classes in terms of clothing was observed.

Many high class women with a rebellious and unconventional character wore *hufu* dress to oppose the stereotypical dress of Tang court women. Thus,

in contrast to the classical styles of romantic and seductive clothing of palace women, the *hufu* dress had quite masculine features and carried radical elements of other cultures that reflected the meanings of openness and inclusiveness of the new Chinese culture (Berman 2020).



Figure 3 Hufu Garment, Early Tang Dynasty

Source: https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/life/2011-03/10/content_12150999.ht

According to Sullivan, the depiction of *hufu* fashion in painting, ceramics and sculpture expresses this very advanced perception of Tang women to reshape their way of thinking, but also to upgrade their social rights. Thus the personality of Tang women in *hufu* dress stands in stark contrast to the traditional elite setting found in the court art of this dynasty as it depicted women through the very eye of male painters such as the famous court artists Yan Liben and Zhou Fang who represented the early and late Tang court art respectively. The concept of patriarchy and male supremacy is expressed as normality through the way court women were portrayed. This, of course, was always in relation to the rules of operation of the imperial house the small society of which was hardly affected by the rest of social and cultural changes of that period (Michael 1999: 138).

Conclusion

We can therefore conclude that during the Tang Dynasty, women's clothing, and textiles in general,

developed in a fast and subversive manner following to the letter the radical socio-political and cultural ferments taking place in the Chinese empire. Of course, China's commercial and cultural exchanges with other countries for a long time contributed to this. The wide variety as well as the high quality of many types of clothing, always in relation to the economic and social status of women, consisted either of innovative, fresh ideas, or of older, traditional versions that were adapted to the new conditions. The concepts of openness, inclusion, freedom, independence, equality and freedom seem to have been linked to the evolution of women's clothing, which nevertheless retained its charm and subtleness. Women's clothing here seems to have its roots much deeper than in ancient Chinese tradition. It was inextricably linked both with the national power and wealth and the unprecedentedly open social policy that resulted from the strangely 'socialist' views of the emperors. Clothing, combined with the corresponding female beautification, was also the 'sieging battering ram' against the, until then, rigid feudal, and at the same time patriarchal system, narrowing the previously great distance between the social classes, but also between the two sexes, creating thus new social standards. Clothing began to become fashionable not only within the borders of China, but also in the neighboring countries, influencing the formation of the traditional women's attires. For example, the Japanese *kimono* as well as the Korean *hanbok* clothing adopted many of the advantages of this dynasty's clothing.

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