

Swarthmore College

## Works

---

History Faculty Works

History

---

2019

### **Wearing The Hat Of Loyalty: Imperial Power And Dress Reform In Ming Dynasty China**

BuYun Chen

*Swarthmore College*, [bchen5@swarthmore.edu](mailto:bchen5@swarthmore.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

---

#### **Recommended Citation**

BuYun Chen. (2019). "Wearing The Hat Of Loyalty: Imperial Power And Dress Reform In Ming Dynasty China". *The Right To Dress: Sumptuary Laws In A Global Perspective, c.1200–1800*. 416-434. DOI: 10.1017/9781108567541.017

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/509>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

## 16 Wearing the Hat of Loyalty: Imperial Power and Dress Reform in Ming Dynasty China

---

*BuYun Chen*

### **Introduction: Sartorial Knowledge and Imperial Power**

In early 1368, soon after Zhu Yuanzhang conquered the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) and proclaimed himself emperor of the new Ming dynasty (1368–1644), he called for the return to correct rituals including proper forms of dress and adornment:

At the beginning, when Yuan Shizu rose from the north and conquered the world, he changed the customs of the middle kingdom to barbarian customs [*husu*]. Scholars and commoners all braided their hair and left a tuft on their foreheads, and wore the wide-brim hat. Their clothes included the *kuzhe* [a riding suit composed of a separate jacket and trousers] with narrow-fitting sleeves, and braided waists and pleats. Women wore short robes with tight-fitting sleeves and skirts. They no longer wore the traditional dress of the middle kingdom ... His majesty detested it for a long time. And so, he ordered that dress be restored to the Tang style: all scholars and commoners tie their hair into topknots, officials wear black gauze caps, round-collared robes, belts, and black boots; scholars and commoners wear turbans, varicoloured round-collared robes, avoiding yellow, and black ... Hence, the barbarian customs that lasted over one hundred years will be replaced by the traditions of the middle kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

The founding emperor's disdain for Mongol Yuan dress, decried as 'barbarian custom' (*husu*), and his urgency in restoring Han Chinese attire betrayed a deep anxiety about the power of clothes. Forms of adornment, such as dress and hairstyle, were essential bearers of identity, social belonging and ritual. But these functions of adornment were exactly what made clothes and hair dangerous. Clothes could be removed and replaced, hair could be cut and changed, and consequently, identities

<sup>1</sup> Yao Guangxiao (1335–1418), Xia Yuanji (1366–1430) et al., Ming Taizu shilu [Veritable Records of Emperor Taizu], in *Ming shilu* [Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty] (Nan'gang: Zhongyang yanjiu yuan lishi yuyan yanjiu suo, 1962), vol. 5, 525 (*juan* 30.10a). For a recent study on Zhu Yuanzhang's reforms, see Zhang Jia, 'Cong zheng guanshang: Hongwu shiqi de fushi gaige' [Restoring Chinese Costume: The Reform of the Clothing System during the Reign of Hongwu], *Journal of Chinese Studies* 58 (2014): 113–158.

turned upside down and inside out. Like dynasty-founding rulers before and after him, Zhu Yuanzhang recognised that conformity in dress was a necessary marker of a loyal subject, and regulation of dress was central to the establishment of his rule. In keeping with this tradition, the Ming founder viewed the promulgation of a new dress code as fundamental to the consolidation of his rule as the compilation of a comprehensive legal code. Whereas the dynastic legal code served to discipline subjects, dress and adornment were envisaged as the means by which to form a loyal subject. Both projects were key to the institution of a new and stable political and social order under the new ruling house.

Over the following couple of years, dress regulations were devised and elaborated for the palace, officials, eunuchs, scholars, craftsmen and commoners based on the sartorial codes of the Tang and Song dynasties.<sup>2</sup> The distinctions intrinsic to these codes – between ruler and subject, official and commoner, merchant and gentry, male and female – were constructs rooted in and perpetuated by a Confucian worldview that idealised traditional agrarian society. The strict regulation of dress, equipage and housing served to place these subjects within the social hierarchy, to make material their identities for both subject and spectator. Indeed, the fashioning of loyal subjects depended on a strict classification and, accordingly, a clear definition of privileges.<sup>3</sup>

Underpinning this sumptuary regime was an understanding of dress as investiture or ‘deep-making’, whereby the putting on of garments sanctioned by the emperor and bestowed upon the subject constituted a person as an empress, or an official, or a servant of the court. As Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass have argued in the context of Renaissance Europe, ‘investiture was ... the means by which a person was given a form, a shape, a social function, a “depth”’.<sup>4</sup> Clothes, equipage and housing constituted the corporate symbolism of the court and the authorised display of such possessions conveyed the loyalties of a subject and the patronage of the court. The dynastic dress code was designed in a similar way to the early modern institution of livery, to mark bodies

<sup>2</sup> For the influence of Tang dynasty regulations on Ming official dress code, see Li Yi, ‘Tangdai dui Mingdai guanyuan changfu yingxiang’ [On the Influence of the Tang Dynasty to the Official Daily Dress in the Ming Dynasty], *Zhejiang fangzhi fuzhuang zhiye jishu xueyuan xuebao* 1 (2013): 54–58.

<sup>3</sup> Yuan Zujie has argued that Ming sumptuary laws constituted an exercise of state power through regulation *by* clothing, not regulation *of* clothing. This distinction emphasises the use of clothing as ‘a tool of state control over society’. Yuan Zujie, ‘Dressing for Power: Rite, Costume, and State Authority in Ming Dynasty China’, *Frontiers of History in China* 2/2 (2007): 181–212.

<sup>4</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.

so as to bind them to political and social institutions. This power, vested in the emperor, to mark subordinates was communicated through the codification of dress and the promulgation of sumptuary edicts. Dress was, in other words, a site of power.

Yet archaeological evidence from the tombs of Ming princes show that Mongol styles of dress persisted well into the sixteenth century, thus revealing both the limits of Zhu Yuanzhang's sartorial code and suggesting, more seriously, the failure of his efforts to eradicate the legacy of the Mongol Yuan.<sup>5</sup> Much of the scholarship on the Ming sumptuary regime has focused attention instead on the ineffectiveness of the court's regulation of dress, especially during the final century of the dynasty when the laws were most openly flouted.<sup>6</sup> These scholars emphasise that a new lord and master, in the guise of wealthy urban elites, gradually displaced the imperial court as the so-called 'consumption-regulating device'.<sup>7</sup> Such an approach to the dynasty's sumptuary legislation regards imperial power and ritual as standing in fundamental opposition to commerce, with the latter as the constant victor. This position further views dress not only as a site of power, but also as a site of contestation between competing systems of value.

In a shift away from thinking about the Ming dynasty regulatory project as evidence of the dazzling commercialised economy's triumph over imperial power, I argue that the court's sumptuary order constituted one among multiple systems of value that invested meaning in dress. The Ming dress code, as envisioned by the emperor and his bureaucrats and codified in texts, expressed a pointed interest in maintaining distinctions both within the official bureaucracy and between the official and

<sup>5</sup> David M. Robinson, 'The Ming Court and the Legacy of the Yuan Mongols', in David Robinson (ed.), *Culture, Courtiers, and Competition: The Ming Court (1368–1644)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 365–421. On the legacy of Zhu Yuanzhang in Chinese historiography, see Sarah Schneewind (ed.), *Long Live the Emperor! Uses of the Ming Founder Across Six Centuries of East Asian History* (Minneapolis: Society for Ming Studies, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991); Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Sophie Volpp, 'The Gift of a Python Robe: The Circulation of Objects in 'Jin Ping Mei'', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 65/1 (2005): 133–158; Sarah Dauncey, 'Illusions of Grandeur: Perceptions of Status and Wealth in Late-Ming Female Clothing and Ornamentation', *East Asian History* 25–26 (2003): 43–68.

<sup>7</sup> This turn of phrase is taken from Arjun Appadurai's oft-cited characterisation of sumptuary regulations as an 'intermediate consumption-regulating device, suited to societies devoted to stable status displays in exploding commodity contexts, such as India, China, and Europe in the premodern period'. Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 25.

non-official realms. This concern with policing boundaries remained at the forefront of the most significant dress reform since the dynasty's founding, which targeted official attire once again. Promulgated by the Jiajing emperor (r. 1522–1567) during the seventh year of his reign, the new edicts sought to rein in the sartorial misconduct of his officials by standardising their casual dress. I survey the Jiajing emperor's 1528 reforms, to show that while the court's regulation of dress was, above all, motivated by concerns about dynastic power and legitimacy, sartorial behaviour across the empire was governed by plural regimes of value. At stake in these texts were the external trappings of imperial authority, not the consuming passions of the greater empire.

### The Ming Dress Code

In 1367, a year before Zhu Yuanzhang ascended the throne as the Hongwu emperor, he charged his senior chief councillor and a committee of scholars with the task of composing a set of guidelines for his subjects. The *Great Ming Commandment* (*Da Ming ling*) was completed in early 1368 and went into effect just eighteen days after he declared the founding of the Ming. Consisting of 145 articles, the *Commandment* was intended to bring order to the realm through the institution of norms for both state and society.<sup>8</sup> The second-longest document of the *Commandment* was Article 51, which detailed the proper forms of dress, headwear, residences, furnishings, utensils and carriages – the first act of Ming sumptuary regulation.

Following the customary statement that, 'The clothing colors, hats, belts, houses, and saddles of the officials and commoners all have gradations', Article 51 proceeded to list a total of fourteen separate provisions outlining the types of dress, caps, parasols, burial plots and even bed curtains suitable for persons of each rank. The use of gold-embroidered decoration was the leading indication of rank, and one which commoners were strictly prohibited from employing as ornamentation on fabrics for dress furnishings. The gold embroidered five-clawed dragon (*long*) was reserved for the emperor, while officials were allowed to use select patterns depending on their rank. Civil officials who had completed their service and retired from court were 'subject to the same regulations as those still in service', and all were to 'follow the style appropriate to their rank'. This stipulation makes clear that the distinction between the official and non-official spheres, as well

<sup>8</sup> Edward L. Farmer, 'The Great Ming Commandment (Ta Ming Ling): An Inquiry into Early-Ming Social Legislation', *Asia Major*, 3rd Series, 6/1 (1993): 181–199.

as distinctions between official ranks, was the chief concern of these restrictions. Military officials, on the other hand, were not bound by the regulations put forth in the *Commandment*.<sup>9</sup> The liberty granted to the military may suggest the relative power wielded by those in service during the early years of the dynasty. Imperial bestowals were also safe from regulations. Such displays of favour belonged to a set of privileges that the emperor could grant according to his discretion. The emperor's right to dress (or not) his subjects, asserted through these fourteen provisions, was the premise from which all sumptuary laws followed.

The Hongwu emperor's early proclamations on dress situated him within a longstanding practice of founding emperors, who sought to order society through the regulation of appearances. In so doing, he – and those before him – laid claim to a system of fixed social and political hierarchies based on a self-sufficient agrarian economy idealised in the Confucian canonical texts, especially in the *Rituals of Zhou* (*Zhouli*), edited during the first few centuries of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–221 CE).<sup>10</sup> The *Rituals of Zhou*, which first proposed a ceremonial dress code for the emperor, served as the model for the sumptuary laws of the successive dynasties, and all subsequent sumptuary regulations followed it in the assumption that the categories of rulers and subjects are absolute. Dress and accoutrements are then assigned to these categories. In other words, the sumptuary project asserted the symbolic and ritual significance of clothing – its role in creating and reinforcing individual and collective identities.

Adherence to the sumptuary laws was enforced by the *Great Ming Code* (*Da Ming lu*), the final version of which was completed in 1397.<sup>11</sup> The punishment for violating regulations governing dress, houses and carriages varied according to rank. Officials were subject to one hundred lashes with a heavy stick and termination of office, whereas in the case of commoners, the heads of household were punished by fifty lashes with a light stick. If apprehended for wearing or displaying the

<sup>9</sup> Article 51 of the Great Ming Code, as translated in Edward L. Farmer, *Zhu Yuanzhang and Early Ming Legislation: The Reordering of Chinese Society Following the Era of Mongol Rule* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 171–174.

<sup>10</sup> Schäfer and Kuhn have shown that annual production quotas for state-owned workshops were drawn from *Zhouli* precedents for sumptuary laws. Dagmar Schäfer and Dieter Kuhn, *Weaving and Economic Pattern in Ming Times (1368–1644): The Production of Silk Weaves in the State-Owned Workshops* (Heidelberg: Ed. Forum, 2002), 53–56.

<sup>11</sup> See Article 194 of the Great Ming Code, 'Violating Sumptuary Regulations on Clothing and Houses'. Liu Wei-qian (1521–1565) et al., *Da Ming Lu* [Great Ming Code] (Yangzhou: Jiangsu Guangling guji keyin she, 1989), vol. 5, 29 (*juan* 12.13).

forbidden dragon or phoenix motif, both officials and commoners were to be disciplined by one hundred lashes with a heavy stick and penal servitude for three years. In all of these cases, artisans were not only penalised, but also suffered more severe punishments.

It took the Hongwu emperor nearly his entire reign to develop and institute dress codes for the emperor, the imperial family, officials and their wives, eunuchs, the military, scholars and commoners. Sumptuary regulations for the dynasty were compiled in a number of texts, including the *Treatise on Dress and Carriages* (*Yufu zhi*) of the official dynastic history (*Ming shu*) and the *Collected Statutes of the Ming* (*Da Ming huidian*). Similar to the sumptuary codes of preceding dynasties, and in keeping with the tradition established by the *Rituals of Zhou*, the dress regulations outlined in both the *Treatise on Dress and Carriages* and the *Collected Statutes of the Ming* were organised according to the social and political hierarchy. Beginning with the emperor and extending to Buddhist and Daoist clergy, the category of person (for example, prince or palace musician) is identified first, followed by the types of clothes assigned to their status. Changes to the regulations are noted under each immutable category and structured chronologically.

Civil and military officials were assigned five categories of dress (*guanfu*) organised according to the occasion on which they were to be worn: court dress (*chaofu*), sacrificial ceremony dress (*jifu*), audience dress (*gongfu*), everyday dress (*changfu*) and casual or leisure dress (*yanfu*). Since everyday dress (*changfu*) was worn most often when handling official affairs, it became a frequent object of regulation during the reigns of successive Ming emperors. The fabrication, colour and accessories of all five forms of an official's dress depended on their ranking in the bureaucracy.

Ranks were further differentiated by the patterns embroidered or woven on the badges worn on the front and back of the robe (Table 16.1). The emperor reserved the right to bestow robes with the *mang* (four-clawed dragon), the 'fighting bull' (*douniu*, dragon-like, with two large curved horns and a fish-like tail), and the 'flying fish' (*feiyi*, dragon's head, carp's body and two horns) on those whom he favoured. Court dress (*chaofu*) and audience dress (*gongfu*) were the first to be outlined by the Hongwu emperor at the beginning of his reign, while the guidelines for everyday dress (*changfu*) followed a few years later in 1373. Additional changes were made to vestments of officials until 1393, when the Hongwu emperor decreed standards for all five categories. Succeeding Ming emperors issued further regulations to reinforce the sumptuary order, such as the 1447 edict that made the production for

Table 16.1 *Rank Badges for Civil and Military Officials*

Rank	Civil (Hongwu 26, 1393)	Civil (Jiajing 16, 1536)
First	Crane or golden pheasant	Crane
Second		Golden pheasant
Third	Peacock or wild goose	Peacock
Fourth		Wild goose
Fifth	Silver pheasant	Silver pheasant
Sixth	Egret or mandarin duck	Egret
Seventh		Mandarin duck
Eighth	Oriole or quail or paradise flycatcher	Oriole
Ninth		Quail
Unclassified officials	Magpie or paradise flycatcher	Paradise flycatcher

unauthorised persons of prohibited patterns of the *mang*, *feiyi* and *douniu* a capital offence for artisans.<sup>12</sup> The repeated attempts to curb manufacture of *mang* robes for private use suggest that the Ming court struggled to control the production, and in turn the circulation, of these coveted symbols of imperial power.<sup>13</sup>

Regulations governing the dress of commoners, including farmers, merchants and servants, generally circumscribed the fabrication of their garments, headpieces, shoes and accessories. For example, in 1381 the Hongwu emperor decreed that farmers were permitted to wear plain weave silk, silk tabby and plain silk gauze, except for those households whose members were engaged in commercial activities.<sup>14</sup> Most of these ordinances, however, were issued under the Hongwu emperor. For the remainder of the dynasty, commoners received comparatively little attention in sumptuary statutes.

<sup>12</sup> An edict issued to the Ministry of Works by the Zhengtong Emperor in 1447 declared, 'There are clothing regulations for both officials and commoners. Now some people have custom-made robes embroidered with the prohibited patterns of four-clawed dragon, five-clawed dragon, flying fish, and "Big Dipper bull". Put the artisans to death and send their families to frontier garrisons as soldiers. People who wear them are to be punished without pardon'. Shen Defu, *Wanli yehuo bian* [Unofficial Gleanings of the Wanli Era] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), *juan* 1, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Sophie Volpp has argued, for example, that the state's continuous concern with regulating the production of these robes suggests that they were available for purchase in the marketplace, 'even though its prestige depended on the fiction that it was manufactured exclusively under imperial auspices' (151). Volpp, 'The Gift of a Python Robe', 133–158.

<sup>14</sup> Zhang Tingyu (1672–1755) et al., *Ming shi* [Official History of the Ming] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), vol. 6, *juan* 67, 1649.



In contrast to late medieval and early modern Europe, in China the rise of merchant capital was less of a concern than the appropriation of imperial insignia by individuals without political rank. By far the majority of attention was paid to the emperor, princes, nobles and civil and military officials, whose roles within the political and social hierarchy were constituted through the rituals of dress. Colour, fabric, insignia and ornament all endowed the body with a specific political and social function within the imperial order. Such markings simultaneously identified officials as loyal members of the court and the supremacy of the court as a corporate body. Thus, when officials removed their vestments, their loyalty – at least the appearance of such loyalties – provoked concern. Following Hongwu, the next and final Ming ruler to issue significant reforms to the official dress code was the Jiajing emperor (r. 1522–1567). Anxiety about the dress of officials peaked in his reign as he manoeuvred to consolidate his authority over the empire on the heels of a ritual controversy that embroiled the court.

### **Jiajing's Reforms: Illustrating the Right to Dress**

Like the Hongwu emperor, Jiajing's 1528 edicts invoked classic ritual texts as a guide to bring order and distinction again to the empire's sartorial landscape. Indeed, the dress reforms were enacted as part of the emperor's moral claim to the throne in the wake of the Great Rites Controversy. The controversy had been caused by his succession, following the death of the heirless Zhengde emperor (r. 1505–1521), and it generated deep concern about the performance of correct ritual and political legitimacy.<sup>15</sup> The Jiajing emperor (Zhu Hucong) was the nephew of the deceased emperor and had been selected to ascend to the throne by a group of ministers, but ritual dictated that only an adopted son of the previous ruler could rightfully claim succession. Posthumous adoption was proposed by the incumbent Grand Secretary Yang Tinghe (1459–1529), but the Jiajing emperor opted instead to have his father declared emperor posthumously (the Xian emperor). Although he prevailed in the end, such a breach of imperial ritual caused great instability in the political order. This, in turn, spurred the Jiajing emperor

<sup>15</sup> Chu has argued that in the Jiajing emperor's conversations with his lecturers, "Loyalty and affection", that is, an official's loyalty to and affection for his emperor, were especially emphasised ... the emperor was fond of using the phrase "loyalty and affection" to praise officials whose deeds he appreciated' (227). Hung-Lam Chu, 'The Jiajing Emperor's Interaction with His Lecturers', in David Robinson (ed.), *Courtiers and Competition: The Ming Court (1368–1644)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 186–230.

to action and in particular to the restoration of the rituals of rulership – including the patterning of social and political order through prescribing forms of dress.

The new measures, however, concerned only the emperor, royal princes and ranked officials. More specifically, the target of Jiajing's reform was casual or leisure attire (*yanfu*), specifically clothes worn when not engaged in official duties. Finding his own leisure clothes too common or vulgar (*su*) and lacking in elegance (*ya*) to befit his status as emperor, Jiajing called upon the Grand Secretary Zhang Zong (1476–1539) to investigate the regulations governing the casual dress of emperors in antiquity. Zhang, following orders, consulted the *Book of Rites* (*Lishu*) and discovered that aside from the formal court attire (*mianfu*), the *xuanduan* (literally 'dark solemn') was most widely worn in antiquity. Soon after, the Jiajing emperor resolved that the leisure attire of the emperor and officials should take the *xuanduan* as its model, and dispatched Zhang to draw up the edicts.<sup>16</sup>

By the end of 1528, three new statutes had been promulgated: 'Dress of the Casual Hat' (*yanbian guanfu*) for the emperor, 'Dress of Loyalty and Tranquility' (*zhongjing guanfu*) for ranked officials, and 'Dress of Preserving Harmony' (*baohé guanfu*) for royal princes.<sup>17</sup> For officials, the significance of the emperor's measure was couched in the familiar discourse on the dangers of dressing without distinctions. Grand Secretary Zhang Zong memorialised (i.e. petitioned) the emperor, stating that:

'There have never been clear regulations on the leisure dress of ranked officials, and followers of the outlandish compete in their eccentric dressing, thereby causing greater disorder. I beg that it be modelled on the ancient *xuanduan* and put in a separate statue to be disseminated throughout the empire, so that noble and base are distinguished.' The emperor then ordered the creation of the 'Illustrations of the Loyal and Tranquil Hat and Dress', to be promulgated by the Board of Rites, together with an imperial edict stating, 'The Ancestors learned from antiquity and established regulations, so that the court and sacrificial dress of ranked officials each had distinctions. But the ordinary people are more cautious toward that which is clear, negligent of that which is obscure. The ancient sage kings were attentive to this, and ordered the *xuanduan* as the leisure dress for officials. Recently clothing styles have been outlandish, with no distinction between superior and inferior, so that the people's proclivities are without restraints. Hence, we have consulted the regulations on the ancient *xuanduan*, and changed its name to the 'Loyal and Tranquil', alluding to 'Thinking of utmost loyalty when entering, thinking of amending one's faults when retiring'. We have made pictures to instruct on the styles and construction. Officials in the capital

<sup>16</sup> *Ming Shizong huangdi shilu* [Veritable Records of Emperor Shizhong] in *Ming shilu*, vol. 74, 1929 (*juan* 85, 9a).

<sup>17</sup> *Zhongjing guanfu* appears as 忠靜冠服 or 忠靖冠服 across the textual record.

above the seventh rank, members of the Hanlin Academy, the Imperial Academy, officials in the Messenger's Office above the eighth rank; in the provinces, Regional Supervisors, Senior Officials of each prefecture, chief officials of each sub-prefecture and county, and the education officials of Confucian schools are to wear it. Military officials of the rank of commissioner-in-chief or above may wear it. The others are prohibited from exceeding the regulations.<sup>18</sup>

Eccentric dressing (*qifu*) was not only outlandish (*guiyi*), it flouted the social decorum long established since antiquity. In reviving the *xuandu*, the dress of antiquity, the Jiajing emperor was harking back to an idealised past when the boundary between ruler and official was dutifully observed.

To accompany each new guideline, the emperor commissioned illustrated albums (*tu*) that depicted and named the categories of prescribed robes, headdress, accessories and patterns. The 1528 sumptuary measure is significant for its novel use of the illustrated manual (*tu*), a format generally reserved for the communication of specialist knowledge.<sup>19</sup> The Jiajing emperor's appeal to antiquity in these sumptuary measures, however, was not merely a trend towards archaism. The use of drawings to illustrate correct dress and adornment as an instrument of statecraft paralleled other trends in the use of *tu* as a tool for communicating imperial power, such as the production of territorial maps and charts of the empire. By ordering the explanation of each item of dress through text and image, the Jiajing emperor entered into a tradition of exegesis – a practice that confirmed the authority and erudition of the author.<sup>20</sup> This interplay between the pronouncement of imperial

<sup>18</sup> *Ming shi*, vol. 6, *juan* 67, 1639. The translation provided in Craig Clunas's essay, 'Regulation of Consumption and the Institution of Correct Morality by the Ming State', in Chun-chieh Huang and Erik Zürcher (eds.), *Norms and the State in China* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), erroneously translates *yanju zhi fu* as the dress of 'officials living out of office' and the dress of officials 'living in retirement'. *Yanfu* refers to the everyday dress worn at home by the emperor, officials and appointed ladies of the court.

<sup>19</sup> See Francesca Bray et al., *Graphics and Text in the Production of Technical Knowledge in China: The Warp and the Weft* (Leiden: Brill, 2007). There exists another album of illustrations of Ming official dress, entitled 'Pictures of Court Costumes and Manners in the Ming Dynasty of China' (*Ming gong guanfu yizhang tu*). Six volumes of the album have survived with colour and black and white illustrations. The dating of the album is uncertain, but the scholars who have worked on the artefact have argued that one of the volumes can be dated to the reign of the Yongle emperor (r. 1403–1424). See Li Zhitan, Chen Xiaosu and Kong Fanyun, 'Zhengui de Ming dai fushi ziliao: Ming gong guanfu yizhang tu zhengli yanjiu zhaji' [*Notes of Ming Gong Guan Fu Yi Zhang Tu: Pictures of Court Costumes and Manners in the Ming Dynasty of China*], *Yishu sheji yanjiu* 1 (2014): 23–28.

<sup>20</sup> Bray has argued that, '*Tu* were considered to contribute to a full understanding of all the classics, but were particularly important as exegetical devices for those which discussed rank and ritual, namely the *Zhouli* (Zhou rituals) and the *Liji* (Record of rituals). Here images helped recreate the embodied understanding and emotions imparted through the

authority on the one hand, and a demonstration of expertise on the other, was consistent with the aims of the Jiajing emperor to establish his right to rule – and his right to dress – during the Great Rites Controversy.

To ensure that all ranking officials were in conformity with the new regulations, the ‘dress of loyalty and tranquillity’ was instituted near and far, from the capital down to the county. For all officials, the *xuanduan* was to be made in dark green. Officials of third rank and above were granted the cloud pattern, while those ranking fourth and below were to wear plain robes (Figure 16.1).<sup>21</sup> For the emperor, the *xuanduan* conformed to colour – black (*xuan*). His robe would be bordered with a green trim and feature 143 dragon designs, including one large dragon medallion on the front (Figure 16.2).<sup>22</sup> The *xuanduan* of the royal princes, who were incorporated into Jiajing’s reform only after reports that they had appropriated the ‘dress of loyalty and tranquillity’, were a simplification of the emperor’s robe. Cut from green silk, it was adorned with a green trim and two rank badges with the dragon design.

Such designs suggest that neither accuracy nor frugality was a priority for the Jiajing emperor. What mattered was the propagation of his rights as emperor through the practice of inscription – imprinting bodies not only so as to make visible the wearer’s place in the social and political hierarchy, but also to make material his authority. By targeting leisure attire (*yanfu*), clothing worn in one’s private residence, Jiajing asserted his right to govern both public and private life. Such an intrusion into the non-official realm of his officials was an effort to rein in those who dressed as individuals rather than as representatives of the court. As in the institution of livery, the power to fix and mark subordinates through clothes served to affirm the emperor’s position as master of the imperium. In other words, the *xuanduan* was the emperor’s attempt to fashion – in the root sense of the term – ‘loyal and tranquil’ subjects. In court and at home, their corporate identity as office-holding subjects, defined by their shared loyalties to the emperor-as-institution, was established materially.

Archaeological and textual evidence suggests that the Jiajing emperor’s initiative was a success. The 1966 excavation of the tomb of the sixteenth-century official Wang Xijue (1534–1610) yielded one ‘hat of loyalty and tranquillity’, a near-exact replication of the surviving illustration (Figure 16.3). In compliance with the 1528 regulations, Wang Xijue’s square-shaped hat features two prominent peaks in the back, and

correct practice of liturgies and the manipulation of ritual paraphernalia’. *Graphics and Text*, 38.

<sup>21</sup> *Ming shi*, vol. 6, *juan* 67, 1639.

<sup>22</sup> *Ming shi*, vol. 6, *juan* 66, 1621.



Figure 16.1 Illustrations of the robes of 'Loyalty and Tranquillity'. Left: cloud-patterned robe of officials of the third rank and above. Right: plain robe of officials of the fourth rank and below. After Li Dongyang (1447–1516) and Shen Shixing (1535–1614), *Da Ming huidian* [Collected Statues of the Ming Dynasty] (Beijing: Neifu kanben, 1587), vol. 24, *juan* 61, 215b–216a. National Library of China – Harvard-Yenching Library Chinese Rare Book Digitization Project, Harvard University.

the ridges and sides are edged in gold thread.<sup>23</sup> Although made from black velvet rather than the prescribed black gauze, the existence of such an object in the tomb of a Wanli-era (1572–1620) official implies that the Jiajing emperor's blueprint for leisurewear was successfully implemented. The hat became so popular that in 1574, the second year of the Wanli emperor's reign, the government banned all non-officials, such as candidates holding the provincial-level degree (*juren*), students of the Imperial Academy (*jiansheng*), Confucian scholars (*shengru*), and commoners and servants, from wearing it.<sup>24</sup> Consistent with the aims of

<sup>23</sup> *Ming shi*, vol. vi, *juan* 67, 1639.

<sup>24</sup> Li Dongyang (1447–1516) and Shen Shixing (1535–1614) et al., *Da Ming Hui Dian* [Collected Statues of the Ming Dynasty] (Taipei: Dongnan shubaoshe, 1963), ii: 1071 (*juan* 61, 317a). In contrast to the *Collected Statues*, the *Treatise on Carriages and Dress*

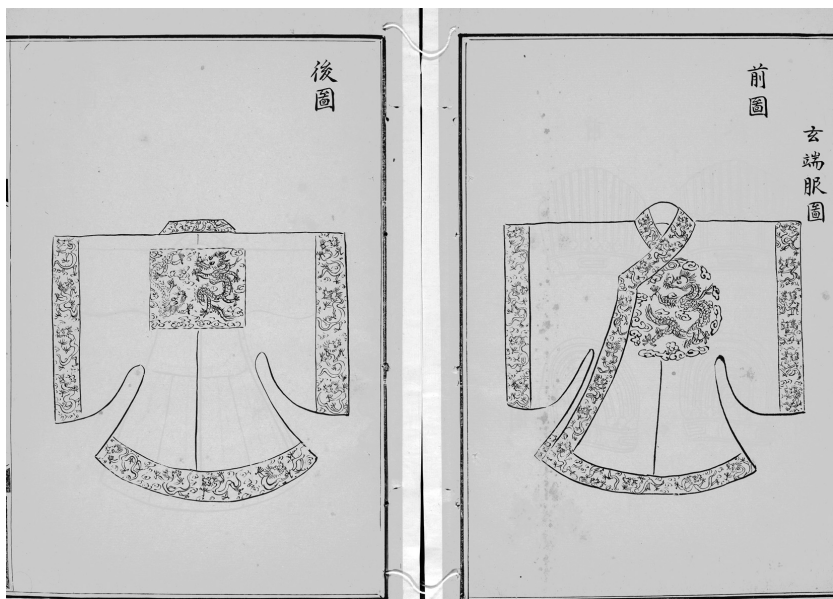


Figure 16.2 Illustration of the emperor's *xuanduan*. After *Da Ming huidian* [Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty], vol. 24, *juan* 60, 28b-29a. National Library of China – Harvard-Yenching Library Chinese Rare Book Digitization Project, Harvard University.

Jiajing's reforms, the 1574 sumptuary measure sought to reinforce the division between the official and non-official realms.

Vernacular sources suggest that these regulations were quite successful. In the late sixteenth-century novel *Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin Ping Mei*), Ximen Qing – an upwardly mobile merchant – is described wearing the 'hat of loyalty and tranquillity' on four separate occasions.<sup>25</sup> On two of these occasions, Ximen's hat is described, letting the reader know that he had one made from white velvet and another from white satin. Ximen's extensive wardrobe brimmed with garments and accessories prohibited by Ming sumptuary protocol, which included the fine damask, satin and woollen robes he paired with

only lists the provincial-level degree-holders, students of the Academy, and Confucian scholars as the culprits. See *Ming shi*, vol. 6, *juan* 67, 1649.

<sup>25</sup> Xiaoxiaosheng (pseud.), *Jin Ping Mei ci hua* [*Plum in the Golden Vase*] (Hong Kong: Xianggang wenhai chubanshe, 1963), see vol. i, ch. 46, 506; vol. ii, ch. 61, 618; vol. ii, ch. 67, 810; vol. ii, ch. 69, 849. On the deviant consumption practices of the women of Ximen's household, see Dauncey, 'Illusions of Grandeur: Perceptions of Status and Wealth in Late-Ming Female Clothing and Ornamentation', 43–68.

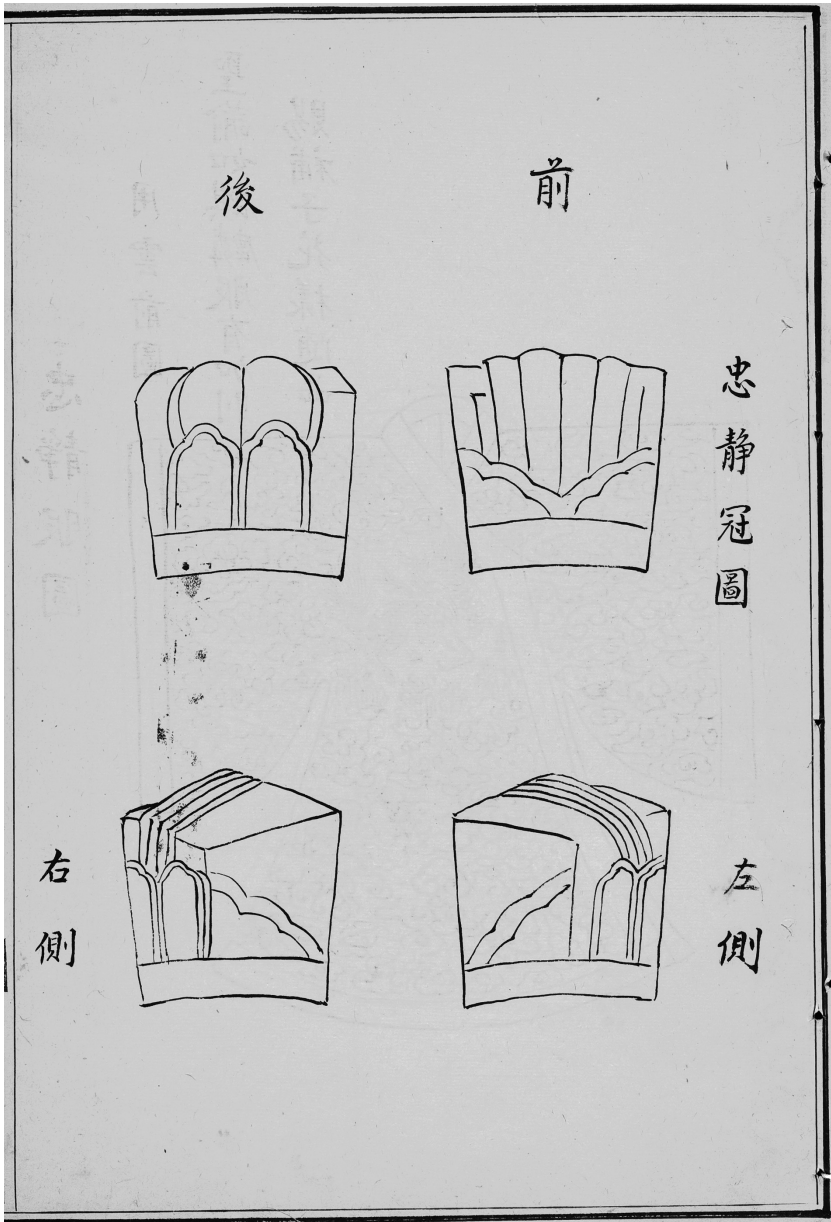


Figure 16.3 'Hats of Loyalty and Tranquillity'. After *Da Ming huidian* [Collected Statues of the Ming Dynasty], vol. 24, *juan* 61, 215a. National Library of China – Harvard-Yenching Library Chinese Rare Book Digitization Project, Harvard University.

his ‘hats of loyalty and tranquillity’.<sup>26</sup> Ximen Qing’s illicit consumption demonstrates that mercantile values existed alongside, and perhaps even in dialogue with, imperial dictates. The fluidity with which Ming robes and hats circulated depended on these two regimes of value, which guaranteed their worth as commodities with exchange value and as possessions that derived their power through a symbolic connection to the court.

At the heart of Jiajing’s dress reforms was the recognition that investiture constituted a person, situating the person within a network of social relations. The Jiajing emperor recognised that since the symbolic function of dress was central to dynastic power, it was imperative that the court maintained its lead position in the sartorial game. That is, by creating a new set of covetable accoutrements of imperial power, he was bolstering the authority of the court. But what the Jiajing emperor may have overlooked was that sumptuary measures are beset by an inherent contradiction. Through the prescription and proscription of specific objects, the laws plainly reify the objects as symbols of rank and status – thereby opening them up to usurpation and imitation. What connected the provincial-level degree-holders, students of the Imperial Academy and Confucian scholars was a shared aspiration to office, indicating that by the Wanli emperor’s reign, the ‘hat of loyalty and tranquillity’ had come to embody officialdom. For commoners like Ximen Qing, who lacked the privileges of formal power but had the means to acquire an expanding range of status-conferring goods, keeping up appearances was fundamental to their expression of wealth and social distinction. Like the wearing of robes embroidered with imperial insignia, donning the ‘hat of loyalty and tranquillity’ signalled access to the throne.<sup>27</sup> This, perhaps, accounts for why the Wanli emperor’s court did not update the laws to include new types of luxury textiles, but did maintain a continued interest in forbidding non-officials from appropriating the hat.<sup>28</sup>

Owning and wearing the ‘hat of loyalty and tranquillity’ was to lay claim to the social status and political power that inhered in court vestments. Imitation did not necessarily diminish court power. Conspicuous competition to put on the raiment of state-sanctioned power reaffirmed the

<sup>26</sup> As Sophie Volpp has observed in her discussion of Ximen Qing’s acquisition of a *mang* robe (which she translates as ‘python robe’), his ‘deviant consumption’ signalled his ‘volatile social aspirations’ and his connections to persons of rank. Volpp, ‘The Gift of a Python Robe’, 158.

<sup>27</sup> Volpp makes a similar argument about the *mang* robe. Volpp, ‘The Gift of a Python Robe’, 157.

<sup>28</sup> Clunas, ‘Regulation of Consumption and the Institution of Correct Morality by the Ming State’, 44.



emperor's place at the centre of the empire.<sup>29</sup> More dangerous was the removal and replacement of official vestments with those of another master. To borrow from Jones and Stallybrass, 'Livery ends at the moment when one wears their own clothes'.<sup>30</sup> The lasting popularity of the 'hat of loyalty and tranquillity' was evidence of the court's hegemonial power – power that had to be visible in the appearance of the emperor and his court and exercised through the right to make and mark his subjects.

### Coda: The Silver Century

The Wanli emperor's 1574 statute was the final piece of sumptuary legislation promulgated by the court. What transpired in the following century has been the main focus of scholarship on the function of sumptuary laws in China. As Craig Clunas has observed, Ming sumptuary laws were neither updated nor reinforced at a period when they were being most openly flouted.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the late Ming world abounded with sumptuous delights. Among the goods to be found in the southern city of Nanjing, as illustrated in the scroll painting by an anonymous court painter, 'Prosperity of the Southern Capital', were furs and leathers from the northwest, Beijing-style boots, seafood from Fujian and Guangdong provinces, and even miscellaneous goods from the eastern and western seas. Situated on the lower Yangzi river, Nanjing was made prosperous by an expanding internal commercial network that traded everyday consumables, regional products and luxury goods across the empire.

With prosperity came innovation in production, which in turn spurred consumer desires. In a collection of anecdotes about Nanjing, the local literatus Zhou Hui (fl. late sixteenth century) recorded one of the new luxuries to hit the market: 'In the past twenty years, gilt thread wrapped around a core of silver, gold leaf lined in silver have appeared'. He went on to criticise the changes wrought by these extraordinary advances in gold work, lamenting that, 'the craftsmen have become more ingenious by the day, the prices cheaper by the day, and human relationships increasingly superficial. How regrettable!'<sup>32</sup> Anticipating Marx's theory of alienation, Zhou's concern stemmed

<sup>29</sup> See Norbert Elias's discussions of the court of Louis XIV. *The Civilising Process, Vol. I: The History of Manners* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978); *The Civilising Process, Vol. II: State Formation and Civilization* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982); and *The Court Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

<sup>30</sup> Jones and Stallybrass, eds. *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, 277.

<sup>31</sup> Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China*, 151–152. See also Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*.

<sup>32</sup> Zhou Hui (fl. sixteenth century), *Jinling suoshi* [Trivia about Nanjing] (Beijing: Wenxue guji kan xingshe, 1955), vol. 1, 259 (*juan* 4, 547).

from an anxiety about how the fetishisation of things was leading to an erosion of human relationships. Having lived through China's 'silver century' (1550–1650), Zhou belonged to a generation of Confucian officials who witnessed material wealth corrode traditional social norms. The marketplace was responsible for catalysing a desire for material comforts that liberated men and women from the rigid hierarchies and distinctions prescribed by Confucian norms – a world turned upside down by the 'lord of silver'.<sup>33</sup>

By the seventeenth century, consumption was a common discursive object of moralising officials living on the periphery of court power. Nowhere was the anxiety about things more evident than in their outcries against sartorial transgressions. Late Ming literati frequently bemoaned the speed with which garments changed. Gu Qiyuan (1565–1628), Zhou Hui's contemporary, observed that women's dress in Nanjing changed every two to three years, in contrast to thirty years ago when styles changed only once in a ten-year span.<sup>34</sup> He found the new variations in officials' and scholars' headdresses even more distressing, as there were 'differences from day to day and something new every month'.<sup>35</sup> One of the loudest critics was the scholar Shen Defu (1578–1642), who having obtained only the provincial-level degree was himself forbidden to don the 'hat of loyalty and tranquillity'. In his magnum opus *Unofficial Gleanings of the Wanli Era* (*Wanli yehua bian*), Shen observed that there were 'three groups of people in the world who, ignoring distinctions, overstep the bounds of appropriate dress'. The first consisted of sons of nobles who dressed in the fourth rank, despite belonging only to the eighth. They were followed by eunuchs who paraded the streets of the capital wearing robes with the *mang* four-clawed dragon and the fighting bull insignia. The final culprits were women, in particular the wives of elites, who flaunted their coronets decorated with pearls and embroidered robes, some even with the designs of *qilin*, flying fish and seated *mang*, in front of senior officials. What greatly distressed Shen was that no one dared or, perhaps, cared to reproach them.<sup>36</sup>

The market was not solely to blame for the effacement of sartorial propriety. From Shen Defu's perspective, the fault lay with the emperor.

<sup>33</sup> See Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*.

<sup>34</sup> Gu Qiyuan (1565–1628), *Kezuo zhuiyu* [Superfluous chats from the guest's seat] (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1991), vol. 3, 235 (*juan* 9). Cited in Wu Jen-shu, 'Mingdai pingmin fushi de liuxing fengshang yu shidafu fanying' [Popular styles of clothing among the common people of the Ming, and the reaction of the gentry], *Xinshixue* 10/3 (September 1999), 74.

<sup>35</sup> Gu Qiyuan, *Kezuo zhuiyu*, vol. 1, 19 (*juan* 1).

<sup>36</sup> Shen Defu, *Wanli yehua bian*, *juan* 5, 147–148.

As Shen saw it, the emperor's repeated bestowals of robes embroidered with the dragon, *mang*, 'flying fish' and 'fighting bull' upon his Grand Secretaries constituted a failure to regulate the possession of imperial insignia-adorned robes.<sup>37</sup> Transgressions of the dress code were a result of the emperor's negligence. Shen cited edicts that explicitly targeted the illicit manufacture of such insignia, suggesting that it was the court's exclusive right to production that had to be protected.<sup>38</sup> Following the reign of the Zhengde emperor (r. 1505–1521), the Ming court no longer attempted to regulate production through sumptuary legislation.

The critiques of Shen and his contemporaries have served as evidence of the state's failure to regulate consumption and, more significantly, the displacement of state power by local power. For Clunas, the government's lack of interest in updating the sumptuary laws to incorporate new goods points to the tacit recognition that the laws were no longer enforceable. Commercialisation is viewed as what finally wrested away the emperor's right to dress his subjects. The opposition between commercialisation (and the rise of self-fashioning among Ming urban elites) and effective sumptuary rule, however, does not account for why elites unrelentingly usurped symbols of court power. The late Ming world may have been turned upside down by material prosperity and social upheaval, but so long as imperial insignia continued to confer prestige on the wearer, the authority of the Ming ruling house remained intact. That is, the absence of enforcement does not mean the act of prescription was any less powerful. An expanding market for luxury goods made the trappings of imperial power available to a wider audience, but it did not erode their appeal.

To view the Ming court as standing in opposition to commerce on the one hand, and dress-as-deep-making as incompatible with dress-as-self-fashioning on the other hand, is to ignore the full complexity of the Ming sumptuary regime. This paper has only addressed one side of this system by showing how dress was instrumental in creating and maintaining Ming subjects. In particular, the Jiajing emperor's campaign highlights the relationship between the project of sumptuary regulation and political

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, *juan* 1, 20–21.

<sup>38</sup> In her research on craft production in the Ming, Schäfer has made a similar argument: 'During the Ming period, emperors and scholars had full confidence in their rights to silk and their knowledge about it. They felt in line with a cultural tradition when they used the symbols and styles of clothing of their predecessors as a symbol for social status and political power. The Ming rulers relied on their hegemonial power and rights when they exerted pressure on artisanal production in their Southern provinces'. Dagmar Schäfer, 'Silken Strands: Making Technology Work in China', in Dagmar Schäfer (ed.), *Cultures of Knowledge: Technology in Chinese History* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 50.