

Swarthmore College

Works

History Faculty Works

History

2019

Empire Of Style: Silk And Fashion In Tang China

BuYun Chen

Swarthmore College, 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). "Empire Of Style: Silk And Fashion In Tang China". *Empire Of Style: Silk And Fashion In Tang China*.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/527>

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.



Introduction

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF FASHION IN TANG CHINA

IN DECEMBER 2014, A TELEVISION SERIES ABOUT THE LIFE OF WU ZETIAN (ca. 624–705), the only woman in Chinese history to rule as emperor of her own dynasty (the Zhou dynasty of 690–705), was taken off the air for purported technical reasons. The abrupt action was, however, actually a response to the low necklines of the Tang dynasty costumes that exposed too much cleavage for China’s State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television. When the show returned in January, the footage had been crudely edited, and in place of widescreen shots, close-ups of the women’s faces elided their bodies. The edited version prompted much criticism from viewers, who took to the Internet to debate whether or not the revealing necklines accurately represented Tang dynasty (618–907) dress styles. Now, as then, the dress practices of Tang women have invited censure.

In Tang China, officials were concerned not with women’s cleavage, but something more troubling: the desire to dress according to personal tastes instead of one’s station in life. To illustrate this point, let us consider an anecdote about the Taiping Princess (d. 713), the powerful daughter of Wu Zetian and Emperor Gaozong (r. 649–683). During a banquet held by Gaozong, the princess emerged wearing a purple robe outfitted with the accouterments of military officials, a jade belt, and a turban-like cap constructed from black silk gauze. She proceeded to perform a dance for the emperor and empress, who were both greatly amused by the spectacle. At the end of the dance, they

FIGURE 1.1. Detail of figure 1.5, *Consort Yang Mounting a Horse*.



FIGURE 1.2. Two equestrian figures, early eighth century. Both wear pointed boots, and their hands are positioned to hold the reins of the saddled horses on which they are mounted. Molded, reddish buff earthenware with cold-painted pigments over white ground. Left: male with a tall, embellished hat; H. 37 cm, W. 30.5 cm, D. 15.5 cm. Right: female with hair in a topknot; H. 36 cm, W. 31.5 cm, D. 13 cm. Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of Anthony M. Solomon, 2003.207. Photo: Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

chided her, “Why dress this way, when girls cannot become military officers?”¹ The editors of *New Standard History of the Tang* included this story as one of the “sartorial anomalies” of the dynasty, a portent of the inversion of gender roles that would befall the empire when Wu Zetian ascended the throne as ruler. The story of the Taiping Princess’s act of cross-dressing, and its transmission through the dynastic annals, is telling for two reasons: first, sartorial behavior was of political and moral concern and, thus, warranted documentation and interpretation; and second, modes of adornment gained meaning only through their attachment to and performance by a wearer in front of an audience. The princess was part of a rich symbolic and material world, in which what people wore and how they wore it, along with their depictions in image and text, were foundational to lived experience. By donning the attire of a military official, the Taiping Princess created and enacted a different image of herself, one that was rendered legible and meaningful through its connection to the gendered politics of her immediate context (fig. I.1). She exemplified the capacity for clothing to organize ideas about power, gender, and morality, exploiting dress to the fullest extent as a technique of *fashioning*.

The Tang men and women who populate this book belonged to a regime of fashion, one quite different from our regime of brand names and mass media, but fashionable nonetheless. Fashion, as epitomized by the story of the Taiping Princess, was first and foremost a meaning-making practice, in which a sense of being or selfhood was constructed in relation to social groups, through encounters with the material world, and conditioned by time and space. Tang China was fertile ground for fashion as a process of image- and self-making to take root, as ritual and official dress codes had opened up the space for thinking about the dressed body as a site of status performance. As such, fashion was implicated in Tang court culture, in the empire's finances, in visual culture, in textile technology, and in literary genres.

FASHION WITHOUT MODERNITY

Until recently, the equation of fashion with Western modernity has been the dominant view throughout the world. Fashion, as the German sociologist Werner Sombart proclaimed in 1902, is “the favored child of capitalism.”² Sombart, of course, was only thinking of Europe—where a permanent revolution of taste, production, and consumption had taken place. For early twentieth-century theorists of fashion, the birth of an increasingly time-conscious world came about through the formation of a modern capitalist system, determined by the accelerated production and consumption of commodities. Viewing it as a symptom of modernity, these classical theorists of fashion agreed that it emerged in tandem with the development and intensification of a commodity culture in nineteenth-century western Europe. By the turn of the twentieth century, fashion had become synonymous with change and symbolic of the rapid turnover of capital. Its study has since been rooted in this Eurocentric formulation of fashion as a register of modernity, generated by the forces of industrial capital.³

Later twentieth-century historians like Quentin Bell and Fernand Braudel echoed Sombart's equation of fashion with Europe—so that dress in civilizations untouched by Western capitalism was merely a foil to a modern fashion system. Chinese dress, for these scholars, belonged to the realm of “costume,” immune to restless change. From Bell's perspective, variations in Chinese dress were “of a kind that Western eyes would hardly notice.”⁴ For Braudel, China belonged to the timeless rest-of-the-world in which dress “scarcely changed in the course of centuries.”⁵ The myth of a static Chinese costume was part and parcel of a broad critique of an inert Chinese society immobilized by tradition that had as much to do with European self-perception as an industrializing force as it did with what Chinese people wore. This discourse of fashion as a peculiarly European phenomenon was also embraced by modern Chinese intellectuals, active during the first half of the twentieth century. In a 1943 article, the celebrated writer Eileen Chang wrote that “generation after generation of women wore the same sorts of clothes without feeling in the least perturbed.”⁶

Recent scholarship has helped to overturn this Eurocentric view, showing that a desire for novelty, increased investment in material goods, and a widening distribution of consumption existed in medieval and early modern Europe, Ming China (1368–1644), and Tokugawa Japan (1603–1868).⁷ These studies have worked to decenter Europe as the origin of consumer society and have turned the consumer revolution into a global phenomenon, characterized as a mark of the early modern world. By establishing shared patterns of consumption as the grounds for an early modernity, historians—particularly historians of China—aimed to call into question the parochial view that conflates modernity with industrial capitalism and the West.⁸ Efforts to revise this narrative have dominated the field of Chinese history, which has been resolutely focused on disputing the distinctiveness of European modernity. This scholarship, while important and valuable, tends to fall into a trap of looking for “sprouts” or harbingers of the modern—defined in terms of the European experience—in historical contexts either contemporaneous to or preceding modern Europe. The search for modernity in China on these terms has fixed the European model as the standard by which to judge the Chinese experience. This also holds true for current studies on fashion in China.

While this study of fashion in Tang China is indebted to the interventions of these scholars, it diverges from their approaches to fashion as an expression of modernity. Instead, it focuses attention on the experience of dress and adornment as fundamentally one of meaning-making for the maker, wearer, viewer, and chronicler. It foregrounds fashion as an open-ended process that encouraged playing with self-formation by exploring the creative possibilities made feasible by the splendor of the material world and documented in ornate visual and literary modes of representation. This is not to suggest that fashion in Tang dynasty China was not related to change. On the contrary, dress and adornment were external trappings of a self and body that sought to square itself with social structures, the mutability of the material world, and political change. Meanings of textiles, garments, and accessories were relational and culturally constructed, such that a style of dress lost or gained meaning and value depending on its relevance to the wider fashion system. Subject to shifting interpretations, change in fashion had as much to do with perception as it did in the actual materials and cut of fabric. Pictorial representations of dress, for example, gave change a visual and material form. Through its association with the practices of representation, change was gradually reified as an aesthetic act, one that could be identified, scrutinized, and enacted.

In this negotiation of social belonging with one’s exchanges with the images of clothed bodies and the materials of dress, the process of fabricating a self was intimately tied to historical time and place. By approaching fashion as processual and interactive rather than determinate, and as a system that is historically contingent rather than universal, we can allow for fashion to exist both with and without modernity—however the latter may be construed. The broader significance of this case study is to model an approach to fashion—one that brings together excavated visual and material evidence

with the transmitted economic, political, legal, and literary texts—in the nonmodern, non-Western context of Tang China.

THE TACTILE AND PLAYFUL WORLD OF TANG FASHION

To understand the plural and contradictory practices that made up fashion in Tang China, we must, as Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass urged in their insightful study of clothing in Renaissance Europe, “undo our social categories, in which subjects are prior to objects, wearers to what is worn.”⁹ Commonly regarded as the cosmopolitan golden age of Chinese history, the Tang dynasty was marked by impressive economic growth, political innovations, the flourishing of art and literature, and increased contact with the outside world. At the height of Tang rule, the capital Chang’an was the largest city in the medieval world and home to over one million residents. The empire became a major sphere of influence within and beyond East Asia, absorbing and facilitating commercial, intellectual, religious, and artistic exchange across territories. The geographical and cultural contours of the Tang empire shifted continually around the local and mobile populations that were brought into its administrative framework. At the same time, the imperial court sought to impose traditional institutions of governance rooted in the classical ideal of a self-sufficient agrarian economy and stable social hierarchy onto this vast territory. The resulting tension between imperial expansion and the expectations of tradition was also mirrored in the fashion system that took shape in this era.

Fashion, as correlated with a desire for change, existed alongside the abiding conviction that clothing must cohere with the body underneath, and represent unequivocally the status of the wearer. Gaozong’s response to the Taiping Princess’s appearance in official military dress is a reflection of how dress was perceived to be constitutive of the person. That such a performance was undertaken by Taiping, or even narrated by the moralizing compilers of the dynastic records, however, suggests that clothing was also a site for contesting predetermined notions of status and gender. Whereas sumptuary codes aimed to regulate sartorial practices by prescribing and proscribing acceptable forms of dress according to status and rank, the creative possibilities opened up by innovations in textile production and encounters with foreign modes of adornment made fashion a force for change. By putting into conversation the visual and literary representations of elite dress, excavated textiles, and sumptuary legislation, this book shows the extent to which desire for material things structured fashion. Nowhere was this desire for sensuous materials more evident than in the demand for silk textiles (fig. I.2).

There were few, if any, areas of Tang dynasty life in which concerns were not voiced about textiles, their production, and use. As the ultimate store of value for personal and imperial use, textiles had a declared centrality to the realization of power, wealth, and status. Textiles were thus guaranteed visibility, and have accordingly survived as



FIGURE 1.3. (Above) Silk purse, eighth to ninth century. The outer textile is a weft-faced compound twill weave with a pattern of flora, birds, deer, and boys at play. H. 14.3 cm, W. 13.7 cm, D. 2.5 cm. Purchase, Eileen W. Bamberger Bequest, in memory of her husband, Max Bamberger, 1996, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

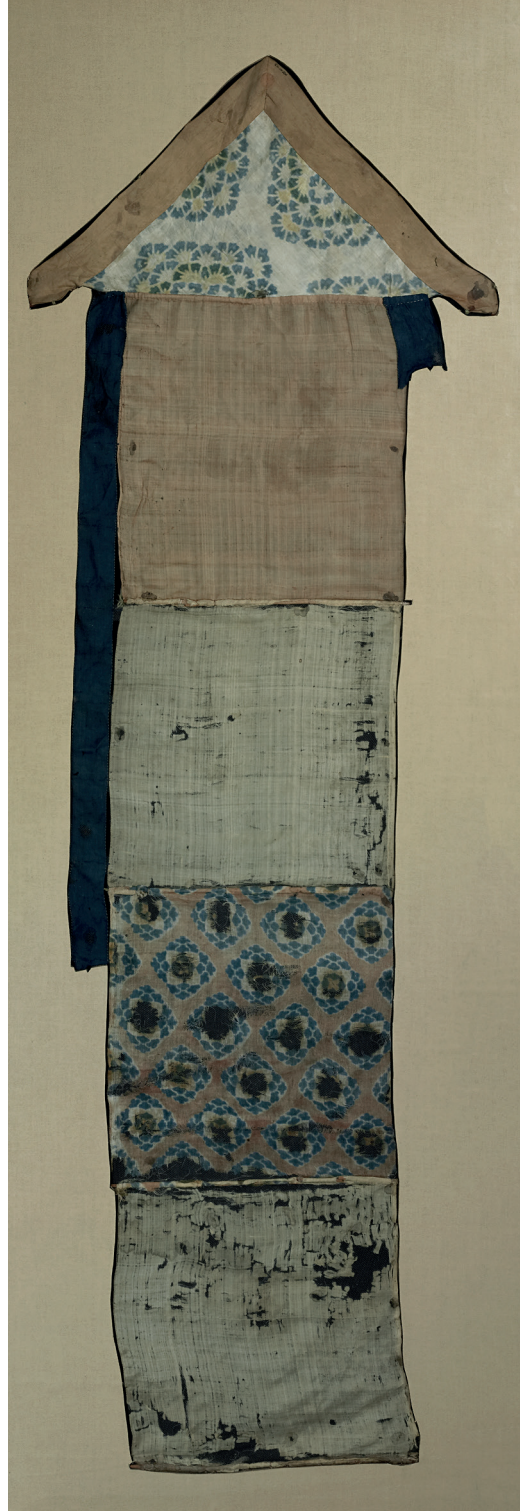


FIGURE 1.4. (Right) Silk banner, ninth to tenth century. This is one of a group of eight clamp-resist dyed banners made up of textiles in the same arrangement, collected during Marc Aurel Stein's second Central Asian expedition (1906–8). Banners were an essential part of Buddhist worship: for the gaining of merit, for prayer, as a votive offering, or for use in ceremonial processions. As objects intended for display, the complexity and quality of the banner's decoration and material reflected both the donor's means and the banner's function. In this one, the banner face is a plain weave featuring clamp-resist dyed rosettes in lozenge shapes. The technique of clamp-resist dyeing was a late eighth-century Tang innovation. The other seven banners are part of the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection. H. 131.5 cm, W. 43.6 cm.; excavated from Cave 17, Mogao Grottoes. © Trustees of the British Museum.

fragments in elite tombs, as sutra wrappers and banners in the Dunhuang caves at the western frontiers of the empire discovered at the turn of the twentieth century, and as treasured artifacts in imperial repositories (fig. I.3).

Desire for such finery was regularly bound to the Tang women who inhabited the imperial court as princesses, consorts, dancers, and wives of ranking officials, and whose competition for sartorial distinction was derided as an agent of social disorder. The most infamous of these women was Yang Guifei (719–756), the darling of Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756), whose taste for sensuous pleasures cost him the throne. Xuanzong reportedly employed an additional seven hundred workers to weave and embroider for Yang Guifei and her retinue, while several hundred more craftsmen carved and molded precious ornaments. The prefects of Yangzhou, Yizhou, and Lingbiao even sought skilled workers to make rare things and unique clothing to offer to her.¹⁰ Excoriated for causing the near ruin of the Tang ruling house, Yang Guifei and her fabled voluptuous body continued to dominate the popular imagination centuries after her death (fig. I.4).¹¹ Immortalized as an icon of the fallen empire, her plump frame and her desires came to embody an ideological narrative of the dynasty. Yang Guifei's legacy has much to reveal about the forces driving fashion in Tang China, as well as the inextricable relationship between women and material pleasures as propagated by male writers.

This book identifies and elaborates on two motors that powered fashion. One was the textile industry, which supplied an increasing variety of patterned, dyed, printed, and embroidered fabrics for clothing. Innovations in textiles were fueled by the imperial court's desire and need for silk, and by the expansion of frontiers that brought artisans into the empire. The growth of regional silk industries further stoked the desires for novel designs and weaves among disparate men and women. The other motor, interlinked to the first, was an ongoing engagement between Tang subjects and their visual and material world that I call aesthetic play.¹² The practices of fashion in the Tang were



FIGURE I.5. Traditionally attributed to Qian Xuan (ca. 1235–before 1307), *Consort Yang Mounting a Horse*, Yuan-Ming dynasties, fourteenth century. The depiction of Yang Guifei mounting her horse with the aid of her attendants is an allusion to her legendary figure. Handscroll, ink and color on paper; H. 29.5 cm, L. 117 cm. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC: Purchase, Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1957.14.

forms of aesthetic play, through which sensual desires were reconciled with formal social structures, and mediated by perception and the sensory experiences of the body.

The materiality of clothing mattered a great deal in this process of play: textiles shaped the body, decorated its surface, influenced posture and movement, and gave form to the body's mass.¹³ Modifications in the fabrication, ornamentation, and shape of garments and the greater availability of such materials and accessories alongside changes in figural art contributed to an increasing awareness of style as historical. That is, through exploring the world visually and bodily, Tang men and women generated meaning from looking at others and being looked at, and gained a sense of being in a specific time and space. Aesthetic play thus describes an event engendered by the fundamental encounter between a self-body and the material world, which then produced acts of expression, such as practices of adornment and metaphoric thinking.

Dressing was a form of play that had to be brokered between a sumptuary protocol mired in classical ritual and a material world that offered novel silks and rare jewels for one to own and to assemble. Through play, a woman of the Tang court, for example, puts on nomadic dress (*hufu*) and ties her hair up into topknots. Having created this image of herself, she then uses it to represent her knowledge about styles of the cultural Other, as well as to demonstrate shared taste with and connections to the fellow women in her network. Aesthetic play involved experiencing the external world bodily and contemplatively. To dress or represent the world required looking at others as much as it entailed looking at the self. As this process recurs, in tandem with material change in the form of new fabrics, new modalities were created for self-presentation. Fashioning and image-making fostered presentations of a self that were constituted and reconstituted in relation to others, locking the "self" into an ongoing process of play. In this way, aesthetic play contributed to the experience of fashion as change.

To investigate fashion as a game of aesthetic play is to engage Tang writers, painters, weavers, and commentators as participants in the system of knowing and judging sartorial change. Silk artisans played through making, painters through fashioning, and writers through manipulating language. Membership in the fashion system did not require material possession and display, but instead demanded knowledge and awareness of changing styles. The two faces of Tang fashion, however, belonged to the palace woman and the poor weaver. This gendering of aesthetic play and material desire through the rival figures of the laboring woman weaver and the lavish palace woman was a discursive move by scholar-officials living during and after the Tang dynasty. By presenting women as the adherents—dressing in ways that did not accord with their station—and the victims—toiling away at the loom—of fashion, the critique emphasized the perilous frivolity of women rather than the weakness of the emperor to govern his empire—or the inappropriate aspirations of educated men. Tang writers positioned themselves as critics of a society upended by a widespread desire for play; in so doing, they sought to locate themselves outside the game. But their ability to document what they perceived

to be a moral crisis required their participation in the fashion system as spectators. Poetic allusions and classical topoi constituted their materials for play, allowing them to articulate their enduring relevance to society.

What manifested in Tang China as the hallmarks of fashion—a desire for novelty and a game of imitation and emulation—was not borne by a controlled process of self-fashioning, but rather bespoke a continuous negotiation between the body, dress, and its social meanings. Appearances and their representation were thus intrinsic to social transformation.

ORGANIZATION

This study of fashion in Tang China is grounded in the wide range of textual, visual, and material sources of how people dressed and what others thought about it. Throughout the dynasty, there existed a tension between those who embraced the playful practice of dress and adornment and those who resisted the idea that sartorial practice should be linked to changing times rather than traditional values. The court continued to defend the notion that clothing should symbolize rank and status, even as its members violated the sumptuary codes. Examining these conflicting views within the broader economic, political, and aesthetic context of the Tang empire allows us to see how fashion was part of larger arguments about self, society, and history.

The shifting constellation of Tang fashion was made up of distinct but related events, which as a whole illuminate how practices of adornment were central to the lived experience of the empire. Organized thematically, this book first explores the symbiotic relationship between the politics of empire and the politics of fashion, and then turns to the forms of aesthetic play that characterized fashion as a meaning-making practice.

Chapter 1 sets the stage by describing key social and economic developments in Tang dynasty China through the rubrics of empire and cosmopolitanism. Imperial expansion and the subsequent building of a vastly expanded geographic and cultural sphere were as critical to fashion's development as the new materials and imported techniques themselves. Cultural and technological innovations, enabled by empire-building, brought men and women living in the inner empire into contact with a larger material world. Chapter 2 examines the discursive traditions in which sumptuary regulations were located to understand how and why sartorial practices mattered in Tang China. These laws are significant not as evidence of fashion's triumph over a static society, but for what they reveal about changes in the scale and technical infrastructure of cloth production that made luxury textiles increasingly available to those with the financial means to acquire them. The government's desire to uphold the status quo was at odds with its own imperialist ambitions: to pay for the conquest and maintenance of the extended frontier, the government pumped vast amounts of tax and tribute cloth into every outpost, paving the path of imperial glory with silk and hemp—and paving

the way for fashion. By limiting the production and circulation of complex silks, while encouraging the making of plain textiles for tax, the government sought to maintain a monopoly over material resources that were critical to the empire's survival. In short, sumptuary laws emphasized the fundamental role of textile production in sustaining fashion and in preserving empire.

Shifting from received textual sources to the visual archive, chapter 3 shows how the garments of the Tang wardrobe were imagined to look on the body and explores the relationship between changes in pictorial style and fashion. Excavated murals and pottery figurines from Tang tombs provide the largest archive of visual evidence documenting the changes in the sartorial landscape. Representations of women and their dress reveal how women's clothing might have looked, but also how they were thought to look by the artisans and painters crafting the images. The visual archive provides important clues to understanding how perceptions of the female body and its relation to clothing changed over time. These changes are documented in tomb art and handscroll paintings, most notably in the creation of the Tang Beauty as a template to be fashioned, which show that artist-image makers depicted the relationship between a body and its adornment through the principle of aesthetic play.

Chapter 4 considers how increased silk production, enabled first by court investment and then further stimulated by the relocation of agriculture and commerce to the south in the latter half of the Tang, produced innovations in textile technology that propelled fashion to new heights. Records of tax and tribute goods show that the extension of silk weaving to the south led to new variations in the types of silks manufactured for elite consumption. Design of silk fabrics, expressed in considerations of color, motif, and scale, constituted the primary catalyst of sartorial change. Weavers, who were indispensable to the tax and tribute system, occupied a paramount position in the fashion system.

Chapter 5 surveys the basic lexicon for thinking and writing about fashion as change. The forging of a language of fashion developed in the poetry of the late eighth and ninth centuries, which linked forms of adornment to a desire for "keeping up with the times." The authors of these poems were the social critics of the era, for whom the desire to be current represented the emergence of a value system predicated on the accumulation of wealth and the obsolescence of things. In their critique, however, they—like the frivolous women they ridiculed—also embraced new styles to make their mark on the world. Male poets, through their emphasis on literary practice and style as the measure of value, were just as invested in claiming social distinction and contemporary relevance. The epilogue returns to the gendering of fashion in the Tang and the implications of this perpetuated legacy in the study of fashion and the history of Tang dynasty women. The key contention of this book is that fashion was central to the lives of all Tang subjects because the empire had placed cloth at the center of the structure of economic and moral values.