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Dress as a Register of Change: Women's Costume and the Shifting Mode of Power in Tang and Song China

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Abstract

Between the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties, Chinese women's dress changed strikingly: Tang images show women with exposed chests riding horses in public, Song paintings show them in narrow garments with closed collars. Scholarship has documented the formal difference well, but explanations tend to adopt a single perspective and cannot reveal the full picture of this disciplinary shift. Placing both dynasties within a single framework and reading transmitted texts, excavated textiles, and pictorial sources together, this article argues that the change tracks a shift in how power reached the female body: under the Tang, power operated through visible marks, so that dress displayed rank and the body was meant to be seen; under the Song, it worked increasingly through internalised norms, so that concealment became a standard women held themselves to. The shift was no simple change of aesthetic taste: four conditions (geopolitics, climate, sumptuary law, and moral pedagogy) interacted to produce it.

Keywords

Tang–Song transition; women's dress; disciplinary power; body history; Sino-barbarian discourse.

1. Introduction

In the early twentieth century, Naitō Konan proposed that the Tang–Song transition marked China's passage from the medieval to the early modern. Extended by Miyazaki Ichisada and others, the thesis became a standard framework for middle-period China. Dress offers an apt window onto such change: it sits against the body while remaining subject to ritual regulation, so shifts in the manners of an age tend to show first in clothing.

Women's dress is the sharpest case. Tang murals show women in low-cut robes, sleeves falling wide and skirts raised to the chest; Song paintings and brick reliefs show narrow jackets, closed collars, restrained postures. Within one cultural sphere, over a few centuries, the visual repertoire inverted. Fashion cycles alone, in my view, do not explain a reversal of this size. The question worth asking is what kind of change in the way power reached the female body this contrast registers.

Scholarship on the subject is abundant. On the Tang side, work concentrates on the spread of Central Asian dress, the cut of the open collar, and the meanings of women wearing men's clothing; on the Song side, it concentrates on the evolution of the beizi, the origins of footbinding, and the prohibitions recorded in the Song History's treatise on carriages and dress. Reconstruction of forms is secure; explanation can be pushed further on two points. Most studies take one dynasty as their object, compressing the comparison into a passing remark in general histories; and causes are attributed one at a time, to Neo-Confucian learning or ethnic relations, with little attention to their interaction.

This article proceeds in two steps. It reconstructs the formal differences between Tang and Song women's dress, reading texts, artefacts, and images together, and then explains them

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through the question of how power reached the body. Three contributions follow: the two dynasties are placed in one frame, so that the change itself becomes the object of study; Foucault's discussion of power techniques is introduced to translate the formal contrast between "open" and "closed" into a contrast between modes of operation, from visible marking to internalised discipline; and the four conditions of politics, climate, institutions, and thought are placed within a single mechanism, specifying the function each serves and how they relate to one another.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

The closest body of work is the general history of dress. Shen Congwen's A Study of Ancient Chinese Dress (2017), which reads artefacts against texts, set the basic chronology for Tang and Song forms; the surveys of Zhou Xibao and of Huang Nengfu and Chen Juanjuan refined the differences between ranks and occasions. These works settle what was worn.

Specialist studies address particular problems: on the Tang side, the origin of Central Asian dress, the periodisation of the open collar, and the politics of cross-dressing; on the Song side, the beizi's narrowing from Northern to Southern Song, the beginnings and geography of footbinding, and the sumptuary prohibitions as evidence of state interest in the female body. Recent work imports the vocabulary of body politics, arguing that discipline over women's bodies moved from external display toward internal regulation. Among it, Hu and Li (2026), who apply Foucault's theory of bodily discipline to the morphological reconstruction of Tang–Song women's dress, come closest to the present article. Their contribution is to establish the general judgement that a disciplinary shift occurred; yet their focus rests on the morphological reconstruction itself, and their treatment of how the shift was generated, that is, how political, climatic, institutional, and intellectual conditions interacted, remains relatively limited. This article builds on that judgement and takes one step further: it places the two dynasties in a single frame and completes the explanation at the level of mechanism.

The third layer supplies theory. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault (2003) distinguishes two techniques of power: one works through public, ceremonial imposition on the body, displaying itself in visible signs; the other works through hierarchical observation, normalising judgement, and examination, converting external coercion into self-surveillance. Zhu Kezhen's (1972) climate research and the Tang–Song transition thesis supply, respectively, evidence about material conditions and a historical coordinate.

Foucault's theory of bodily discipline provides this article with a heuristic analytical framework. Within this framework, I examine the deeper causes of the formal transformation of Tang and Song women's dress through the lens of a shift from exterior to internalised disciplinary power. In the exterior mode, power imposes itself through public, legible signs: the body is marked and displayed, its visibility is itself the medium of power, and compliance rests on external surveillance and rank. In the internalised mode, power enters daily life as norm and pedagogy, and external requirements are converted into self-imposed standards; compliance rests on shame and respectability rather than continuous observation. The two are not a binary but a continuum along which the balance can move. The task is to trace that movement across the Tang–Song divide and to identify what pushed it.

3. Women's Dress in Tang China: Visible Forms, Exposed Bodies

The dominant ensemble was the ruqun, a jacket and skirt whose defining features were the open collar, wide sleeves, and a high waistline. Collar shapes varied; the tan collar, popular from the High Tang, extended downward in a U shape that could expose the upper chest. The stone coffin engraving from Princess Yongtai's tomb shows attendants in low-cut, narrow-sleeved jackets with trailing skirts; in the painting attributed to Zhou Fang, Ladies with Flowered

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Headdresses, aristocratic women wear voluminous gauze robes that reveal the skin beneath. These images share an outward orientation: the female body is not erased but conspicuously present to public view.

Sleeves and skirts point the same way. Under early Tang Central Asian influence, narrow sleeves were briefly common (attendants in Prince Yide's tomb murals wear short jackets with tight cuffs), while from the High Tang, aristocratic dress moved toward wide sleeves, so that a noblewoman in the Wei Hao tomb mural has sleeves more than a foot wide. The characteristic skirt was raised to the chest, and a fragment from Li Chui's tomb confirms the chest-high waistline. The Old Tang History's treatise records that the formal robe of titled women had a wide-sleeved, full-skirted cut (Liu, et al., 1975).

Three practices are more analytically interesting than the mainstream forms, because together they suggest how loose ritual constraint had become. Central Asian dress is the most visible. Its cut, with turned-down collar, narrow sleeves, and belted waist, suited riding, and as Silk Road traffic expanded it became fashionable. Yuan Zhen's poem "Faqu" describes women imitating Central Asian cosmetics and music, and the Old Tang History records that in the early Kaiyuan era palace women riding in the imperial retinue all wore Central Asian hats, while official and commoner households imitated them (Liu, et al., 1975).

Women in men's clothing are a second line of evidence. The New Tang History records that at an imperial banquet Princess Taiping wore a purple robe, a jade belt, and a black gauze folded cap, with the seven accoutrements of a military official, and danced before the emperor, who merely joked with Empress Wu that a woman could not serve as an officer (Ouyang & Song, 1975). The Old Tang History adds that from the Kaiyuan era women wore men's robes and boots, "and inner and outer, high and low, were as one" (Liu, et al., 1975). Cross-dressing of this kind blurred a gendered order of dress, though I would hesitate to read it as a programme of resistance rather than as licence permitted at court.

The third case is the exposed chest itself. Read alongside paintings such as Ladies with Flowered Headdresses and the Old Tang History's record that palace women in the Kaiyuan era appeared "brightly made up and unveiled, no longer screened" (Liu, et al., 1975), it can be argued that dress practices treating the female body as an object of aesthetic attention did exist, and that they became relatively rare in later periods.

What the three cases share, in my reading, is visibility. Power worked through signs of rank; status differences were publicly legible in dress, and the body was not required to hide.

4. Women's Dress in Song China: Concealed Forms, Contracted Bodies

The visual logic reverses. The straight-collared, front-opening beizi became the most recognisable garment, its two panels hanging open without buttons and closing high, usually leaving only the neck and collarbone visible; everyday sleeves narrowed markedly, the chest-high skirt gave way to a waist-high skirt, and layering thickened into a sequence of chest wrap, jacket, and beizi.

Excavated textiles from the tomb of Huang Sheng in Fuzhou supply firm evidence. The tomb, opened in 1975, yielded 436 grave goods, including 354 silk textiles and 201 items of clothing; one narrow-sleeved robe of greyish-purple crepe measures 123 cm in length and 147 cm across the sleeves, with sleeves only 25 cm wide, a straight collar, and an open front (Provincial Museum of Fujian, 1972). Women in the Song painting Moonlit Terrace wear the same type. Song dress was not uniformly narrow, though. The same tomb holds a wide-sleeved robe of brownish-yellow gauze, 121 cm long and 182 cm across the sleeves, worn as aristocratic formal dress (Provincial Museum of Fujian, 1972). Narrow sleeves are a trend of everyday wear, not a rule, and reading Song "conservatism" as a single sartorial rule flattens differences of rank and occasion.

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Texts confirm the artefacts. The Song History's treatise records numerous prohibitions aimed at women's dress, directed against false hairpieces and tall crowns and against gold leaf, pearls, and kingfisher feathers, repeated across reigns (Toqto'a, et al, 1977). Repetition shows how limited their effect was, but it also helps explain how plainness came to be established as a standard.

Beyond cut and fit, the Song also saw several more coercive means of bodily constraint. The veil extended concealment from clothing to the face: Tang women travelling outdoors wore a brimmed hat that covered much but left the face visible, while Song practice favoured a fuller covering. Sima Guang's Household Rituals states that a woman should not look beyond the inner gate without cause and, if she must go out, should cover her face. The requirement belongs to elite household ethics; for commoner women, whose labour took them outdoors, degrees of concealment cannot be generalised.

Footbinding carried a heavier bodily cost, and its origins remain disputed. The usual view places its rise in the late Northern Song, with wider practice in the Southern Song among elite and some urban households; whether it spread broadly is not established by quantitative evidence. What can be said is that binding altered bone mechanically, cut the radius of movement, and made steady walking difficult, contracting a woman's social space in physical rather than merely symbolic terms.

5. Explaining the Shift

The shift from exterior to internalised discipline in Tang and Song women's dress resulted from several generative mechanisms working together.

The first is geopolitics and the Sino-barbarian discourse. Tang power was strong, and Chang'an gathered merchants, envoys, and students from far afield; the court welcomed foreign cultures, and Central Asian dress extended that openness into daily life. The Song reversed the situation. Confronted by the Liao, the Western Xia, and the Jin, the court grew acutely sensitive to the boundary between Chinese and barbarian, and Central Asian dress turned from an enviable fashion into something to be watched. The key change, in my view, is that dress entered political judgement: wearing a foreign form could be read as a statement of allegiance, and demands for a Sinicised women's dress grew louder.

The second is climate as a material constraint. Zhu Kezhen (1972) showed that China's climate cooled after the late Tang, with harsher winters and more frequent disasters; thicker fabric and higher collars became easier to accept. Climate cannot explain everything — footbinding and veiling have nothing to do with temperature — but it supplied a material reason why concealment became acceptable in practice.

The third is the institutional coercion of the sumptuary prohibitions, the court's direct instrument where climate had supplied only the background condition. The Song History's restrictions on women's dress were justified as frugality, yet their effect was to compress, by regulation, the space in which women could display themselves through clothing (Toqto'a, et al, 1977). Once dressing ceased to be a private matter and became a matter of state, dress turned from a means of expression into an object of administration.

The last, and I would argue the most far-reaching, is moral pedagogy and the internalisation of discipline. From the Northern Song on, Cheng–Zhu learning rose; Zhu Xi spoke of illuminating heavenly principle and extinguishing human desire, Sima Guang composed his Family Models, and didactic books laid down detailed rules for women. Over time, women came to regard exposure as shameful and concealment as proper, so that control stopped arriving only from outside and became a requirement women placed on themselves. Back to the framework. Prohibition produced "you may not wear that"; pedagogy produced "I do not want to wear that." The second is more fundamental. Power no longer needed to be present at each act of dressing,

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because it had been written into self-perception. This is what internalisation means. Power did not disappear; its point of application moved from the outside of the body to the inside.

In sum, the four conditions each had their place: climate changed the material conditions of Tang and Song women's dress, geopolitics changed judgements of its legitimacy, institutions supplied coercive instruments, and thought supplied the mechanism of internalisation. They did not act independently but accumulated and reinforced one another in concrete situations.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the change in Tang and Song women's dress and the logic of power behind it. In the Tang, the ensemble of open collar, wide sleeve, and chest-high skirt prevailed, the body was meant to be seen, and dress marked rank. In the Song, the straight-collared beizi and narrow sleeves became everyday wear, layering thickened, and veils, footbinding, and demeanour rules contracted the space a woman's body could occupy. More importantly, the change registers a displacement in the logic of discipline: Tang power operated externally and visibly, while Song power turned toward internal self-restraint, and through prohibitions and pedagogy "conservatism" was internalised in mind and externalised in conduct. Dress thus moved from a marker of status to a vehicle of bodily discipline. It should be stressed that this article describes the process as a movement of the balance between two ideal types, not as a clean opposition between two periods: ritual constraint also existed in the Tang, and wide-sleeved formal dress survived among elite Song women. The transformation of Tang and Song women's dress was therefore not a one-off "rupture" but an enduring and far-reaching process of change.

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