

# ***Exploring the Cultural Logic, Social Structures, and Spiritual Essence of the Tang Dynasty Through Garments as a Medium***

**Yuxi Liu**

*Honam University, Gwangju, South Korea  
1723675952@qq.com*

**Abstract:** Given the extensive 5,000-year history of Chinese culture, it is impossible to comprehensively examine it within the scope of a few thousand words. This study focuses on the Tang Dynasty due to its distinct clothing characteristics. Firstly, the Tang Dynasty is mainly divided into four periods: the Early Tang, Wu Zhou, High Tang, Middle Tang, and Late Tang. These four periods will serve as the starting points for the study of clothing characteristics, aiming to understand the trends and fashion of the Tang Dynasty in China during these eras. Secondly, the study will delve into the social classes of the Tang Dynasty, exploring how clothing expressed these classes and analyzing the relationship between clothing colors and social status in the Tang period. Finally, following notable periods of Tang dynasty restoration, this study will explore the meanings and emotions people imbue clothing with, as well as its role in societal progress.

**Keywords:** History, Tang Dynasty, Costume, Change Social.

## **1. Introduction**

During the Tang Dynasty, the nation's strength surged, its territory expanded vastly, and its economy flourished. Both ideological and material production reached historic peaks. Diplomatically active, Tang China was one of the world's most powerful nations during that era. Through extensive exchanges with other countries, Tang's economy, society, culture, and art exhibited diversity. Consequently, succeeding generations abroad often referred to the Chinese as "Tang people," highlighting the prominence and influence of the Tang Dynasty. Characterized by openness, Tang Dynasty clothing also embodied a tolerant and inclusive attitude.

This study focuses on: Firstly, what are the main characteristics of clothing during the four periods of the Tang Dynasty? What cultural logic does these characteristics convey? Secondly, what social structures are expressed through different clothing styles? Thirdly, why were clothing changes necessary? What emotional transmissions occurred during these changes?

This study will focus primarily on data from historical documents, subsequent research literature, and online sources, with supplementary analysis of historical textbooks, to explore the cultural logic, social structure, and spiritual core conveyed through Tang Dynasty attire as a cultural vessel.

## 2. Tang Dynasty costumes

### 2.1. The primary characteristics and cultural logic of clothing

Tang Dynasty attire, referred to as Tangzhuang, shifted from the previous concept of natural rights in creativity, incorporating real imagery of flowers, birds, fish, and insects into pattern design. Traditional motifs like the dragon and phoenix, however, were not excluded; this was influenced by the idea of divine right of kings. The design of costume patterns during this period leaned towards a style of freedom, opulence, and robust artistry [1]. In the early Tang Dynasty, the empire had just been established, and the society as a whole was marked by austerity, causing the fashion style to continue that of the preceding Sui Dynasty. The trade interactions with regions like Central and West Asia facilitated the exchange and blending of diverse cultures. Characteristics of foreign attire, such as Hu costumes, hats, and boots, gradually permeated the Central Plains. These elements interacted and fused with Han Chinese clothing culture, creating a mutual influence and integration. Moreover, the unification of the nation provided conditions for the integration of dress cultures. This fusion of apparel traditions contributed to the greater variety in Tang Dynasty attire, as the vibrant colors and distinctive patterns of Hu attire profoundly influenced Han clothing. This impact not only made Tang Dynasty attire more unique and artistic in color and design but also enriched its diversity, making it more bright and splendid while enhancing its diversity, as shown in Figure 1 [2].



Figure 1: Characteristics of the early Tang

Before reaching the zenith of the Tang Dynasty, there was a pivotal period that set the stage for its flourishing, marking a crucial step toward the prosperous Tang era [2]. "The Wu Zhou era," inaugurated by the first canonical female emperor in Chinese history, witnessed a significant elevation of women's status [3]. This period integrated patterns and styles characteristic of the Western Regions into clothing, resulting in brighter colors and bolder attire.



Figure 2: Wu Zhou new clothing styles

As illustrated in Figure 2, the variety in neckline designs increased, and skirts gradually descended to the high waistline. Accessories became more diverse, and influenced by Western factors, new clothing styles emerged, such as the lapel Hu outfit. This typically features a lapel, cross-opening, narrow sleeves, a belt at the waist, small-legged trousers, and leather boots, conveying a sense of efficiency and neatness. And clothing became gender-neutral, with women dressing in men's attire becoming increasingly common [4].

During the flourishing Tang Dynasty, development in all sectors of the nation advanced further. The open social mindset, prosperous economy, and close interactions along the Silk Road with foreign nations led to the incorporation and integration of elements like foreign-style Hu attire, which drove the progress of clothing. Women became bolder and more individualistic in showcasing their beauty, resulting in more daring designs, including garments that revealed the chest and arms. The economic prosperity also ensured the populace's prosperity, providing time and financial means for personal expression, exploration of beauty, and creativity. Consequently, this era saw vigorous development in silk weaving and other crafts, laying a solid foundation for the opulence and diversity of attire. Followed by the Middle Tang period, though the economy wasn't as prosperous as during the High Tang, people's lives remained relatively stable. This era's attire inherited the traditional styles of the High Tang, such as the round-collared robe and Ju skirt, further integrating with foreign fashion elements. The colors introduced gradation combinations, differing from the bold and vivid tones of the High Tang; the Middle Tang's clothing colors were more refined, reflecting a unique aesthetic of the time [5]. Moreover, accessories for children became more varied and exquisitely ornate, with various hairdos and hairpins often adorned with precious jewels and stones. Textiles have improved in technique, yielding more abundant and exquisite fabrics. Innovations in dyeing techniques have further enriched the patterns on clothing. Men's leather belts and headgear, especially 'Fu Tou,' have become more diverse and their decorations more refined [5].



Figure 3: The prosperous Tang Dynast

In late Tang, due to social upheaval, economic decline, and corruption in the court, the people suffered immensely. As a result, the extravagant and individualistic clothing trends waned, and aesthetics shifted accordingly. People preferred loose-fitting garments, such as men's attire reverting to traditional and mid-Tang styles, but overall, clothing became simpler and less elaborate. For women, fashion predominantly featured voluminous embroidered robes or thin, wide-sleeved gauze gowns, accompanied by chest wrappings and long skirts. Consequently, women's decorative scarves, or "pibei," grew broader, with their draping styles varying depending on individual personality or preference, adding a sense of fluidity and grace to their overall appearance as shown in Figure 4. The overall color scheme of attire has shifted from the earlier vivid tones to a preference for softer hues, conveying a sense of restraint and gentleness.



Figure 4: Late Tang Dynasty attire

## 2.2. The difference in attire reflects the social structure

In the Tang Dynasty, the social hierarchy primarily comprised the imperial family and nobility, the bureaucratic class, the scholarly community, the commoner class, and the servile class. Among these, the imperial family stood at the pinnacle of society, followed by the nobility who, irrespective of political policies or economic provisions, enjoyed the highest privileges, including access to the finest silks and satins. Their garments were predominantly in vibrant, formal colors such as red and purple, with the emperor often reserving specific hues like ochre yellow as a symbol of unequaled power. The imperial family frequently employed patterns of dragons and phoenixes along with exquisite textile techniques to underscore their elevated status, as shown in Figure 5 [6].

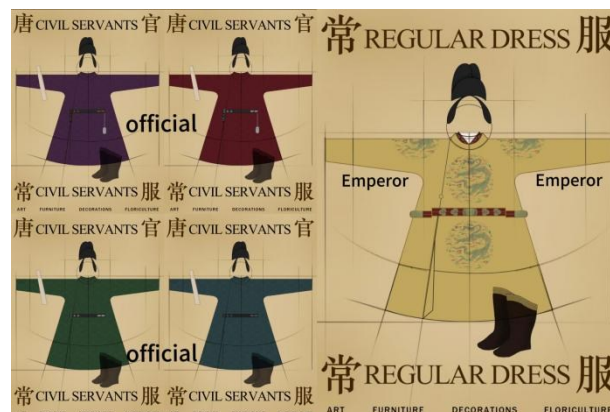


Figure 5: Tang Dynasty official's everyday attire and the emperor's everyday attire

Among women's attire, gauze and fine silk were particularly favored for their intricate craftsmanship and sheer, translucent qualities, making them highly desirable among noblewomen. The bureaucratic class was further divided into a nine-rank, thirty-step hierarchy, ranging from the first rank (正一品) to the ninth rank (从九品), with each rank divided into two levels: regular and subordinate. Some steps were further categorized into upper and lower grades. These hierarchical distinctions also influenced their attire. In terms of color, only officials from the first to the third ranks were entitled to wear purple, a symbol of nobility. Although officials of the fourth and fifth ranks could not wear purple, they were allowed to wear red, historically referred to as "crimson" or "绯色 (Fei se)." Meanwhile, both the sixth and seventh rank officials wore green, but the shade of green for the sixth-rank official was darker than that for the seventh-rank official. Eighth and ninth grade officials wear blue, following the same principle as sixth and seventh grade officials. Eighth grade officials don dark blue, while ninth grade officials don light blue, thereby distinctly reflecting the hierarchical distinctions.





Figure 6: A painting of literary figures gathering in the Tang Dynasty

During the era of Empress Wu Zetian, distinct patterns were embroidered on the attire of civil and military officials. The civil officials' garments often featured birds like peacocks, symbolizing elegance and scholarly grace, while the military officials' clothing showcased beasts such as lions and tigers, representing valor and bravery. This tradition of assigning specific patterns continued into later generations [6].

The scholarly class, a term for educated individuals in ancient China, wore varied colors depending on the occasion. Preferring white, they saw the color as pure and flawless, symbolizing their noble character. Hence, candidates for the imperial examinations often wore white robes, earning the compliment of being called "white-robed dignitaries." (Because being a successful candidate in the imperial examinations was highly valued in the Tang Dynasty, many prime ministers were also candidates, indicating that although one might be a common scholar without official rank, they could still command the respect and influence usually associated with high officials). In scholarly gatherings and sacrificial ceremonies, it was common for scholars to wear black, as the color conveyed a sense of solemnity. Therefore, black attire was also prevalent on formal occasions. Outside of these formal settings, scholars typically favored lighter-colored garments that were closer to natural hues, such as light yellow or light blue.

Additionally, members of the scholar class were also permitted to wear silk fabrics, but due to the high cost of silk, it was typically only those with better economic conditions among the scholars who could afford such attire. The majority of ordinary scholars or those with limited financial means would opt for clothing made of hemp and baskute, which were not only cheaper but also breathable. Unlike the three aforementioned groups, the common people prioritized practicality. Being engaged in labor, both men and women wore relatively snug clothing, unlike the wide sleeves and hems used by the royal, noble, and bureaucratic classes. Due to limited financial resources, the main fabric for their garments was hemp and baskute, with colors predominantly green. Moreover, they were not allowed to wear the primary colors—purple and red—which were reserved for the nobility and officials. Accessories are also simpler for the upper segment of this group, with women often wearing hairpins without intricate gems or gold filigree, typically opting for ordinary thorn hairpins. Men wear simple waistbands without excessive adornments. The lowest stratum, however, consists of enslaved individuals, such as personal attendants and military bondsmen, who due to their humble origins face various restrictions. In terms of attire, they generally wear grey outfits, differentiating themselves from 平民. Both men and women adopt dark brown, black, or grey clothing, leaning toward simplicity. They rarely wear long dresses, instead favoring short tops and pants to facilitate labor. Inferior households used rough, non-breathable linen fabrics that made it difficult to withstand the cold in winter. Since the identity contracts of slaves, who mostly belonged to the despicable class, were held

by their masters, some households with too many slaves would mark their clothes with special symbols or use different colored materials for easy management and distinction from other households [7].

Ancient China classified colors into primary and secondary hues—primary hues referring to pure colors such as green, red, yellow, white, and black, while secondary hues encompass shades like dark red-blue, light red, pale blue, purple, and grey-yellow, resulting from the mixing of primary colors. These primary and secondary hues were tools to distinguish social status and rank, never to be mixed indiscriminately [8].

### 3. The emotional transmission in clothing changes

From the above text, we can infer that Tang Dynasty attire was distinct and strictly regulated, with people of all classes adhering to these hierarchical norms, reflecting the respect and maintenance of feudal hierarchy at the time. However, with the subsequent development of the era, Hu clothing and other foreign elements were introduced and became popular, influencing people across all social strata and diversifying attire. This illustrates the impact of cultural exchange on clothing and demonstrates the willingness of the people to embrace new things and their openness to foreign cultures. As times changed, so too did people's preferences. The early Tang period, witnessing the transition between old and new dynasties, inherited the garments of the previous era. As it was in the early days of establishing the nation, the fabrics of commoners' clothing were mostly plain, and the styles were relatively simple, reflecting the practical approach and proactive attitude of the people in restoring production, as well as their focus on national construction and development by curbing personal individuality. Even though the Tang Dynasty was just beginning, it already showcased the inclusiveness of various ethnic cultures. For instance, Hu attire, as mentioned earlier, frequently appeared in people's daily lives. The blending of clothing not only expressed the early Tang period's desire for friendly development and mutual progress among different ethnic groups but also demonstrated an open-minded and inclusive mindset, along with confidence in their own culture. During the Tang Dynasty, rulers often promoted Confucianism, leading to an emphasis on the inheritance of traditional clothing elements since the Han and Wei periods, such as the restoration and improvement of the 冕服 (mian fu) system. The form and patterns of 冕服 (mian fu) carry rich traditional cultural connotations, and by restoring 冕服(mian fu), it expressed respect for and the Inheritance of traditional culture, as well as the emotions and determination to revive Chinese culture. In the prosperous Tang period, when the dynasty reached its zenith, the abundance of material wealth and economic prosperity fostered a love for life and an increased demand for quality of life. This was reflected in clothing, where people dared to showcase their beauty and innovate with bold designs, symbolizing their passion for life and self-confidence. During this era, people, like the nation's development, exhibited a thriving and upward-trending spirit. The cultural integration of foreign ethnic groups during the Tang Dynasty also reflects the era's confidence and inclusive spirit, as well as people's appreciation and fondness for culture. The late Tang period was a time of complexity and transformation. The An Lushan Rebellion marked the gradual decline of the Tang Dynasty, as the prosperity of the time widened class disparities, and the breakdown of the equal-field system accelerated social contradictions, leading to the displacement of the common people. During this period, people's attire became more restrained. For instance, women often draped scarves over their shoulders, which not only added a sense of elegance to their clothing but also served as a form of coverage. Yet, the beautiful is always reluctant to be forgotten. During this period, people continued the styles of the prosperous Tang dynasty, making them even more elaborate. Despite living in troubled times, they still maintained beauty and solemnity, expressing the belief that the chaos would soon pass. It was precisely due to the unstable political situation that innovation decreased in the late

Tang period, with more emphasis on imitating and repeating earlier garments. The unease of the times deprived people of the motivation and courage for innovation.

### 3.1. Various aesthetic changes conveyed through clothing

During the early Tang Dynasty, the establishment of a new state preserved certain characteristics of Sui Dynasty attire to some extent. People favored simplicity, and the social atmosphere was relatively plain, leading to a preference for subdued colors in clothing. These colors conveyed a refreshing closeness to nature, reflecting the era's aesthetic of elegant and minimalist beauty. The new nation was like the birth of a new life, full of vitality and exuberant energy. Coupled with frequent external communications and close interactions with various ethnic groups, by the height of the Tang Dynasty, clothing had become more vibrant with the nation's development. Saturated colors like bright red and deep purple were widely used. The common folk were willing to spend time decorating themselves, choosing fine fabrics, and innovating new combinations, earning the praise of onlookers for their splendor. This reflects people's passion for life and their pursuit of beauty. With the prosperity of the Silk Road, the clothing culture in the Middle Tang period became more diverse and refined. Garments integrated elements from various ethnic groups and evolved makeup to complement the attire. Clothes also became more intricate; designs on collars and cuffs grew more elaborate. Unlike the exuberant use of color in the High Tang era, Middle Tang fashion opted for harmonious blending of hues, ensuring colors appeared cohesive on clothing, showcasing the era's aesthetic yearning for harmonious beauty. During late Tang, political upheaval and societal unease led to more reserved dress, with muted colors like those of early Tang becoming prevalent. To mask anxieties, people turned to elaborate accessories crafted from precious materials, mirroring a fading grandeur. Clothing was returned to traditional styles, emphasizing cross-collar and right-sided closing designs, reflecting a revival and respect for ancient cultural heritage.

## 4. Conclusion

The evolution and dissemination of clothing played a pivotal role in the social progression. In the Tang Dynasty, the clothing system strictly adhered to hierarchical norms, which substantially aided in preserving the feudal class structure and stabilizing societal order by clearly delineating the standing of various individuals. The Tang Dynasty's economic prosperity, coupled with the advanced textile industry, was aptly reflected in the diversity and plurality of clothing styles. The thriving of the garment industry also catalyzed economic development in related sectors. The transformation of clothing styles in the Tang Dynasty not only influenced the attire of the time but also had a profound impact on the aesthetic concepts of subsequent generations. As an integral part of Chinese culture, Tang Dynasty clothing, with its distinctive characteristics, fostered cultural identity among the people and promoted a sense of cohesion and cultural unity among various ethnic groups, contributing to the consolidation of the dynasty. This style not only shaped later aesthetics but also inspired artistic creations in fields such as painting and sculpture, where numerous works and pottery figurines captured the vivid and lifelike essence of Tang clothing, thus propelling the development of art.

Analyzing the characteristics of costume changes in the Tang Dynasty from the perspective of values. The transition of Tang Dynasty attire from the conservative and restrained narrow-sleeve, narrow-leg garments of the early Tang to the daring and open-chested clothing of the high Tang, which showcased the beauty of the body's lines, reflects the economic affluence that encouraged people to actively seek enjoyment in life. The boldness and openness of high Tang fashion also embodied the people's pursuit of beauty, the development and liberation of individual character. This shift from early to high Tang signifies a transformation in aesthetic values. When the Tang Dynasty was first established, a strict hierarchical dress code was instituted, dictating the garments of officials,

varying patterns, colors, and accessories. Differences in fabric between noble and commoner attire highlighted the feudal society's hierarchical value system. Clothing served as a clear marker of social status, reinforcing the recognition and adherence to hierarchical norms within people's minds. The Tang Dynasty marks the height of the Silk Road's prosperity, hence the era's extensive absorption of foreign cultures. The prevalence of Hu garments during the Tang period is the best evidence of this trend. The blending of Hu attire with Central Plains attire reflects the Tang's clear values of openness and inclusiveness, where diverse cultures learned from and enriched each other, thereby enhancing both sides' apparel culture. In the middle to late Tang Dynasty, the nobility and wealthy merchants favored using fine fabrics and precious pearls, gold, and silver for their attire. Not only were the materials exorbitantly priced, but the craftsmanship involved was also highly refined. These lavish garments served as a means for the aristocracy to showcase their status and wealth. The significant disparity between social classes and wealth notably contributed to the fall of the Tang Dynasty. Although during the Tang Dynasty people enthusiastically embraced new things, they also preserved traditions well, enabling even amidst the integration of foreign fashion cultures, the fundamental elements of traditional Han clothing to remain evident. This reflects the Tang people's respect for and inheritance of cultural traditions in their values, while also embodying a spirit of bold innovation and proactive progressiveness, striking a balance between tradition and innovation [9].

## References

- [1] Ren, H.C. & Zhang, Y.Y. (2009) 'Cultural Absorption: The Incorporation of Nomadic Clothing Colors by Agricultural Civilizations During the Early Tang Period' [J]. *Film Review* ':83-84. DOI:10.3969/j.issn.1002-6916.2009.21.052.
- [2] Long, T. & Liu, X.P. (2021) 'The impact of Hu (barbarian) apparel on the dressing philosophies of women during the prosperous Tang Dynasty.' 41(9):94-96. DOI:10.3969/j.issn.2095-0438.2021.09.028.
- [3] Ma, D. (2024) 'A Study of Tang Dynasty Costume in 2024: Centered on the Cultural Fusion of Hu and Han Clothing'
- [4] Pu, X.Q. (2017) 'General History of China' Sui, Tang, Five Dynasties, and Song
- [5] Zuo, Q.M. & Mo, C. (2020) 'Chinese Attire through the Ages: The Elegance of Tang Daughters'
- [6] Sheng, C.W. (2011) 'Research on Ancient Chinese Costumes'
- [7] Liu, X. & Zhang, S.Y. & Ou, Y.X. & Song, Q. (907) 'The Old Book of Tang' and 'The New Book of Tang'
- [8] Xu, H. (2018) 'The colors in ancient China were categorized into primary and intermediary hues.' 2018(3):43. DOI:10.3969/j.issn.1003-1073.2018.03.022.
- [9] Tang Dynasty Clothing Special Study—Focusing on the Integration of Hu and Han Clothing Cultures (2024). Original Document. Retrieved from <https://m.book118.com/html/2024/0912/7011043131006151.shtm>