

An Attempt to Analyze the Implicitness of the Aesthetic Features of Chinese Art

Taking the Aesthetic Features of Women's Clothing in the Flourishing Period of Tang Dynasty as an Example

Zhaofang Xv

Arts and Design School

Huanghe Science and Technology College

Zhengzhou, China, 450005

Abstract—Tang Dynasty, at the height of power and splendor in the Chinese Feudal Society, had not only a stable political situation, a prosperous economy, and a brilliant culture, but also had clothing which was splendid, rich, colourful, free-spirited, luxurious and liberated. The strong ethos and the joyous creativeness of Tang Clothing were mainly embodied in Women's Clothing. Females in Tang Dynasty, especially those lived in the flourishing period, had their daily attires bold, luxurious, and tailored to highlight the beauty of the body, and in their way they abandoned the affected and restrained clothing style of former times and replaced it with a lively, jubilant, liberated and magnanimous clothing style. The new style presented an implicitness of openness: such as the reticent and elegant Ruqun dress, and the masculine dressing of "dressing as man and Hu clothing", both of which reflected the ample growth of dressing in this open country and the unique aesthetic fashion formed.

Keywords—Tang Dynasty; women's clothing; aesthetic features

I. INTRODUCTION

Known as the Heyday of Chinese feudal society, Tang Dynasty had not only a stable political situation, a prosperous economy, and a brilliant culture, but also had clothing which was splendid, rich, colourful, free-spirited, luxurious and liberated. The traditional dress of our country came to its height in this age when beauty was pursued and adored. Under the background of a wealthy nation and its prosperous culture, production and silk industry made continuous progress; frequent foreign exchanges also contributed to the unprecedented prosperity of clothing, and Tang costumes became the most brilliant chapter in the Chinese costume history. The brilliant colours, the myriad decorations, the bold design, the exquisite workmanship and the refined clothing patterns of Tang costumes inspire awe in modern people. A professor in costume history remarks, 'Tang Dynasty, with its sound administrative system and brilliant culture, stands as the peak of Chinese Culture.' The image of women's clothing of Tang Dynasty stood in history for three hundred years, and it traced its roots back to former times while opened up a new era, and it remained awe-

inspiring in the history of costumes. The major matching forms of Tang clothing are Ruqun dress, Dressing as man, and Hu clothing.

Overall, the strong ethos and the joyous creativeness of Tang Clothing were mainly embodied in Women's Clothing. Females in Tang Dynasty, especially those lived in the flourishing period, had their daily attires bold, luxurious, and tailored to highlight the beauty of the body, and in their way they abandoned the affected and restrained clothing style of former times and replaced it with a lively, jubilant, liberated and magnanimous clothing style. Tang clothing was renowned for its bright colours, multiple styles, and even makeup was often attuned to the style of the clothes.

In his *Experience of Beauty*, Li Zehou writes that in Tang Dynasty, on the one hand, the culture exchange and integration of the south and the north refined and renewed the classics from Han-Wei (the Northern Dynasties) and new studies from Qi-Liang (the Southern Dynasties); on the other hand, frequent foreign trade promoted communications, and the Silk-Road did not only attract the gathering of foreign merchants Hu Shang, but also brought etiquette, costumes, music, art, and various religions from foreign countries. For instance, verses like 'Each of the ladies has a fascinating face, Their skin is delicate, Their manner full of grace' in Tu Fu's poem *Ballad of Lovely Women*, and 'Snow-white breasts half in veil were like intricate snow' in Fang Gan's poem *To Beauty*, and 'Light slighted onto snow-like bosoms' in Li Qun Yu's poem *For the Singing Maid*, all from an angle showed that in the very inclusive and open Tang Dynasty, female aesthetic fashion not only retained the implicitness influenced by Confucian doctrine and feudal system, but also contained Tang women's great enthusiasm towards the new, the bold pursuit and creativity towards beauty, and the exhibition of the beauty of the outline of human body. Tang women began to dress as man and wear Hu clothing (as shown in Picture 1). In total, the aesthetic fashion showed an unprecedented and healthy and open tolerance in clothing.



Picture 1. Tang Dynasty. Portrait of women dressed as men

II. ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT

A. Clothing forms embodying the openness and inclusiveness of women's garments in the flourishing Tang Dynasty

1) "Women dressed as men" embodying the ideology of equality of men and women

It was once stipulated in the *Book of Rites· Nei Ze* that "man and woman shall not be dressed alike" and females dressed as men would be regarded as women without virtues at that time. This concept was totally abandoned later, especially in the Kaiyuan and Tianbao Periods of Tang Dynasty when the dressing form of "women wearing men's clothes" was fashionable and became a public, daily and common way to dress. First it was popular among the nobles and court maids and later was gradually introduced to the folk communities, adored by most ladies.

It's recorded in the *New Book of Tang· Wuxingzhi* that: "Emperor Gaozong held a court banquet; Princess Taiping was present wearing purple dress, jade belt, folded headband, bow and arrow and so on and she gave a dance performance before the Emperor. The Emperor and Empress said, laughing 'women cannot be military officer. Why are you dressing like this?'. It's thus clear that, for the daughter dressed as a man, the Emperor and Empress not only was not angry but laughed and talked, they accepted it in the heart and even showed appreciation and admiration in their eyes, which also indicates that the tendency of women wearing men's clothes had appeared since the beginning of Tang Dynasty. It's also stated in *Tang Yulin* that: "Consort Wang was the Emperor Wuzong's favorite concubine. Every time Emperor Wuzong went hunting or for a trip, she would followed him and was ordered to be dressed like Emperor Wuzong." It shows a very common phenomenon of women wearing men's clothes at that time and also embodies the unique aesthetic attitude for garments in Tang Dynasty – equal, tolerant and open, which, however, poses a great challenge for the feudal clothing etiquette in the feudal society dominated by Confucianism but also is a significant fightback against the thought that "man and woman shall not be dressed alike" as stated in the *Book of Rites*. Meanwhile, the women's imitation of men's dress indicates that: there

were less constraints against women in the Tang dynasty than that in other eras of feudal society; the openness of social vogue gave enough freedom for women's dressing and created a timely open, tolerant and equal aesthetic idea and atmosphere of garments.

2) "Hu clothing" from assimilation of external culture

Hu clothing is relative to the Han clothing characterized by loose garment and belt, mainly including the clothes of nationalities beyond the Great Wall. These clothes normally have turn-down collar, front-opening top fly, narrow sleeve, closed-fit small jacket, trousers, leather belt decorated by several small ribbons, and high-waisted leather boots. The outfit is easy to wear and more convenient for activities compared with previous garments; in addition, there is little difference between men's and women's clothes.

From the late Sui Dynasty through the early Tang Dynasty to the flourishing Tang Dynasty, women wearing men's clothes or Hu clothing had been a hallmark of garments in the silver age of feudal society. Women wearing men's clothes and women wearing Hu clothing were both popular and sometimes they either interacted on each other or were mixed together. Among Hu clothing, what women love the most is the screen fence, curtain hat, Hu cap and boots, which can be seen not only from the portraits of ladies of Tang Dynasty but also from the clay figurines of Tang and Hu people wearing Hu clothing discovered in aeological exploration. Even some Tang poems embody this Hu-clothing-dressing custom (as shown in Picture 2: Portrait of the lady wearing Hu clothing), such as the poem wrote by Yuan Zhen: "since the intrusion of Hu people, fine hair and fur products can be seen everywhere. Women are willing to be married to Hu people and learn Hu dressing, and the showgirls are willing to learn Hu music for performance. The Hu music, Hu dressing and other Hu culture have been popular for the fast fifty years."

In the Tang Dynasty, the dressing phenomena "women wearing Hu clothing" and "women wearing men's clothes" were both popular during the Tianbao Period and Kaiyuan Period of Tang Dynasty, and also regarded as fashionable dress-up during the reign of Emperor Wuzetian. For the nationwide epidemic of dressing, it was once recorded in the *Old Book of Tang· Yufuzhi* that: "early in the Kaiyuan Period, attendants, concubines, court maids and even horsemen all wear Hu cap, showing pretty face without any veil. Later civilians imitate this practice and the curtain hat is no longer used." All people, from royal nobles to folk women, were fond of this dressing mode and developed a new aesthetic mindset for garments. Besides, women were in the majority for adoring Hu clothing, which, without doubt, is thanks not only to the enlightened policy, thriving economy and mutual friendly exchanges and infiltration of different nationalities in the Tang Dynasty but also to the Hu clothing its own advantages including comfortableness, convenience and no distinction of identity and rank.



Picture 2. Portrait of the lady wearing Hu clothing

3) “Topless” with revealing beauty

The topless women’s dress can never be seen in feudal society before Tang Dynasty, which conveys the kind of healthy “revealing” and directly reflects the open-mindedness in Tang Dynasty. Women are greatly bounded by traditional feudal ideas and ethics while women’s costume of the High Tang period seems to be unusually elegant and graceful and dares to reveal the breast, fully displaying the beauty of female body curves. The unearthed female figurines and murals of Tang Dynasty strongly prove this. As to the best expressions of topless, we can find “The half-hidden pink breast is as white and tender as snow” in *To the Beauty* written by Fang Gan, “The breast is as white as snow and a lot of faces, as dense clouds” (*Nanxiangzi*) and “Wearing a topless silk dress” (*Coming upon the Girl Next Door*) written by Zhou Fen. Unlike the previous image of female in costumes covering the whole body, women in this period fully show their beautiful body posture. Topless short jacket and half-arm flowing mantle with fine gauze texture vaguely reveal the white delicate skin and plump body of women, which are mysterious and sexy and also in line with the aesthetic psychology of plump beauty in Tang Dynasty (as shown in Picture 3).



Picture 3. Topless female figurine of Tang Dynasty

The “Topless” in Tang Dynasty is mainly evolved from the previous traditional slip skirt, with emergence of flat collar as the most prominent feature. The neckline is very low and large so that women’s cleavage can be seen, as shown in Zhou Fang’s painting *Group Portrait of Noble Women*. In the painting, a female’s plump upper chest is revealed under the gauze on her upper body, which fully

demonstrates Chinese’s show of body beauty and craving for female liberation in Tang Dynasty. Women usually wear the topless without underwear to show their plump breasts. In a period, topless is only popular in the upper class society and the earliest topless is worn by concubines and Kabuki players. According to research, only the noble women in the High Tang period can wear topless. Princesses and concubines are allowed to reveal their breasts and singing and dancing courtesans can wear half-hidden breast dress to please the audience, but half-hidden breast is not allowed among females from ordinary family. Thus, the topless is positive and healthy, representing the open-mindedness of Tang Dynasty and respect for women’s social status. The topless shows the beautiful body curve and confidence of female in a much bolder way. It’s the ideological emancipation of women’s spirit in High Tang period and also the reflection of feminist spirit instead of ugly revealing of the body. Although topless fails to continue in the feudal society, it’s in some sense the magnificent chapter in costume history of feudal society and it has profound influence on later costume form.

B. “Slip skirt” with elegance of implicit beauty

Slip skirt is a kind of traditional female costume in feudal society of Tang Dynasty, shown as a short jacket or a blouse on upper body, a dress on lower body and half-sleeves with brocade scarf on shoulders as decoration. In the form of retaining self charm, slip skirt in the High Tang period constantly absorbs the essence of foreign costume and becomes the most classic and beautiful costume in clothing epic. The jacket needs to be short and small while the dress is fat and long, and the former is for the upper body while the latter is for the lower body. It’s a high skirt with waistband at the chest or even at the armpits so that neck and chest skin is revealed, producing elegant, slender and ethereal feeling. Slip skirt reaches its peak in the Tang Dynasty with unprecedented large number of new styles and colors, exquisite texture, gorgeous patterns and superb skills (as shown in Picture 4).



Picture 4. Slip skirt

Half-arm, also known as half-sleeves, is a kind of collarless symmetrical short jacket changed from upper skirt in the Wei and Jin Dynasties. Sometimes, there are small laces in top fly area, which can be bound together. The sleeves can reach to the elbow and the short jacket can reach to the waist. Since its neckline is large, it's usually worn outside the shirt, which is similar to today's popular small short coat of J-Korean style on the outside. It is a common new coat in the Tang Dynasty and belongs to palace suit, which is popular both in the royal palace and in the countryside and can be worn by both men and women.

Brocade scarf is also called "painted silk", a kind of female costume in feudal China, which is popular in the Tang Dynasty. It's a long strip shaped towel, which is worn on the shoulder, drops down on the back and is then wound on the back of hands. Most of it is made of gauze with emblazoned patterns or patterns woven with gold and silver threads. Brocade scarves for married and unmarried women are different in shape, and the latter type is more slender, which dances with the wind while walking and is very charming and beautiful. Brocade scarf also has a large impact on female decoration in current days. For instance, women sometimes wear decorative scarves on the neck or shawls.

Slip skirt fully embodies the unique and subtle aesthetic tendency of female in High Tang period and becomes the common costume of female at all levels of that period. The elegant dress, short jacket and brocade scarf form the image of a beautiful female at that time. As the historical record of Wu Zetian says, "Around grain rain, there are a lot of government officials and beauties on the way to Luoyang known as the flower city. Dresses of flower watchers dance and fly with the wind; drinkers are happy with elegant behaviors. They are more beautiful than and as red as peony. They appreciate and create beauty. It's an unprecedented beautiful scene with unrepeatably good effect".

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, women's costume during the High Tang period is diverse with open-minded and bold innovation and subtle tender aesthetic fashion. Subtleness remains in open-mindedness and moderate open-mindedness and innovation combine with subtleness. The formation of this unique aesthetic psychology has its deep roots.

Further cultural exchange between China and foreign countries prompts multicultural fusion. After several centuries' splitting, a unified Tang Dynasty comes into being with prosperous economy and culture and stable politics. It creates unprecedented achievements in all aspects, which makes it a leading role in the world. Tang culture spreads around the world and its capital Chang'an is worshiped by people from different Asian countries. It has a vast territory with unprecedented prosperity and forms the open-minded culture with strong inclusiveness. People have spiritual freedom and innovation develops greatly, which create a culture character with masculine beauty as the mainstream of

the times. Costume in this mainstream naturally plays the most.

The improvement of social civilization makes the feminist consciousness gradually strong and Wu's participation in politics further improves the social status of women. Women's thought becomes bolder and much open, especially the aristocratic women, and the openness of thought and behavior is not only reflected in politics, but also in costume. Thus, Hu clothing appears, women dress like men and the open clothing image of topless appears. Women dress like men and Hu clothing worn by both men and women fully show that women in this period carry on an unprecedented bold clothing reform in clothing history.

Of course, in the middle period of feudal society, regardless of its quite open policy and open-mindedness, the Tang Dynasty still can't get rid of the traditional Confucian "rites". Under this kind of rites, as a female clothing form, slip skirt appears and is promoted in each period of the feudal society with conservatism and subtleness as the main characteristic, representing people's aesthetic requirement of women wearing costume covering the whole body.

The prosperity of Tang costume culture is rooted in powerful national strength, survives in the open policy, can't exist without Tang people's courage to swallow anything and everything. The pursuit of self beauty breaks the shackles of feudal system for men and women, and between the rich and the poor. The charm of Tang costume has been retained in people's heart and becomes the fashion art of that time. It plays an incomparable role in the development of Chinese clothing and deeply influences other surrounding countries, making a great contribution to costume field.

REFERENCES

- [1] Feng Zemin and Liu Haiqing. *The History of the Development of Chinese and Western Costume*. China Textile Press, 2007.
- [2] Li Zehou. *Three Monographs for Aesthetic Ideology*. Tianjin Social Science Press, 2003.
- [3] Ye Licheng. *Costume Aesthetics*. China Textile Press, 2005.
- [4] Shen Congwen. *Research on Chinese Ancient Costume • Tang and Song Dynasties*. Shandong Pictorial Press, 2000.