

The “Red” Finery System in the Sui and Tang Dynasties

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Abstract: Chen Yinke holds that though the Sui Dynasty only lasted several decades in China’s history, most of its laws and regulations were inherited by the Tang Dynasty without much change, so the two dynasties can be regarded as one. The greatest significance of the Sui and Tang Dynasties for China at that time was nothing more than the reconstruction of a unified concept of the country nearly 300 years after Qin and Han Dynasties in a state of disintegration. In that situation, the color system, as one of the major systems, showed a very special aspect. Changes took place in the Sui Dynasty on red, always acting as the vital one among the five colors corresponding to the five elements (metal, wood, water, fire and earth). The Wu De Shi Zhong Theory was slowly watered down. Meanwhile, with the prevalence of Buddhist culture, the combination of foreign and Chinese color concepts greatly manifested the color in Chinese social life. The input of color and technology from the West, to some extent, changed the composition of Chinese color as well as the external color and its style, which in some cases may even become popular elements, with secondary colour used by the ruling class in a large amount. However, red maintained its important position at that time because of its orthodox position in China. This paper mainly focuses on the changes of red in the history of the finery system via the research on costume colors in the Sui and Tang Dynasties.

Construction of the red finery system in the Sui Dynasty

The Sui Dynasty rulers reestablished the finery colour system. According to *The Etiquette Annals of The Sui Book*, the Emperor Gaozu of the Sui Dynasty issued imperial edicts to reestablish the finery colour system of the Zhou Dynasty as soon as he took the throne. The edicts says that since the lucky bird crimson-winged finch comes, the Zhou Dynasty has gone, and the five virtues reinforce each other, the color of red is the optimal color of court finery. Also, in the *Cui Zhongfang Biography of The Sui Book*, Cui Zhongfang states that the fire of the five elements, the blesses from the God and the auspicious omen of the red light in the early period of the Sui Dynasty decide that red is the optimal colour for the whole country. And with respect to the chapter *Emperor Xuan of Chen Dynasty of History as a Mirror*, it states that the court finery, flags and sacrifices are all red while martial attire is yellow and daily clothes are in other colors. Though *The Sui Book* edited by Wei Zheng doesn’t refer to finery, its five *Etiquette Annals* record the court discussions about the etiquette system and the regulations of carriage colors and finery colors in different etiquette occasions in details. When Emperor Gaozu of the Sui Dynasty took the throne, he set the fire as the five virtues and set red as the authoritative color of court finery and imperial robes. As for the robes of the emperor, their major colors are red series including light red, vermilion and crimson and black-and-white series including dark black, black and white, while its partial colors are cyan, yellow, light blue and green. The crown shows a new pattern -- fur clothing made by lamb skin, while the crown and robes retain the traditional pattern -- dark black clothing and light red gown with white yarn and unlined underwear. And the colors of the prince’s ceremonial dress are same to the emperor’s.

Table 1: The colors of the emperors' robes in the Sui Dynasty according to The Sui Book

The crown with fur clothing	The crown	Cyan cover		Vermilion underwear	Worship of heaven, worship of the emperor's father in heaven, worship of heaven and earth, greeting solar items, court meeting, year-end worship of gods
	Fur clothing	Black lamb skin		Black silk collar	
	Light-red gown	socks		Red royal shoes	
The crown and robes	White pearl curtain	Dark-black clothing	Light-red gown	Vermilion socks	Worship of heaven, worship of the emperor's father in heaven, worship of heaven and earth, greeting solar items, court meeting, year-end worship of gods, spring court meeting, autumn court meeting, worship of ancestral temple, worship of the sacred shrines, ceremony of ploughing, seeing off generals' expedition in the temple, return from expedition, coming-of-age ceremony, wedding, court meeting in the lunar January, meeting infant and dukes in the front court
	White yarn and unlined underwear	Cyan cuff, edging and front piece		Red royal shoes	
	Belt	Belt with natural color and vermilion underwear, silk outside		Vermilion of the upper dress	
	Green	Two white jade pendants		Dark-black silk threads	
	Double ribbon	Yellow, red, white, light blue and green		Pure black	
Tall crown	Black hood	Crimson suede gown		Shenyi (robe of Han Dynasty)	Court meeting on the first day of the lunar month, on New Year's Day and on the winter solstice, worships
	White yarn and unlined underwear	Black collar, cuff, edging and front piece			
	Over-the-knee crimson yarn	White false belt			
Black hood	Purple riding dress				Winter hunting

Table 2: The robes colors of the princes in the Sui Dynasty

Items	Pattern and color			Occasions
Robes and crown	Dark-black clothing (livor clothing)	Light-red gown		Worship, coming-of-age ceremony, and wedding
	White yarn and unlined underwear	Cyan cuff, edging and front piece	Same color to gown (light red)	
	Belt	Belt with natural color and no vermilion underwear	Vermilion and green edging	
	Two jade pendants, vermilion silk threads	Big ribbon with four colors: red, white, light blue, livor and pure vermilion body		
	Small double ribbons	Same color to big ribbon	Vermilion socks and red shoes	
Crown for pilgrimage	Crimson yarn gown	White yarn and unlined underwear	Black collar, cuff, edging and front piece	Return from the worship of ancestral temples, court meeting on New Year's Day and the first day of each lunar month, ceremony in memory of ancestral teachers
	White false belt	Crimson yarn over the knee	Vermilion socks and red shoes	
Crown for pilgrimage with three chomas	Black hood	Emerald green thread ornaments	Crimson yarn gown	Worship of ancestral temples, court meeting on New Year's Day and the first day of each lunar month, Ceremony in memory of ancestral teachers
	White yarn and unlined underwear	Black collar, edging and front piece	White false belt	
	Crimson yarn over the knee			

It is Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty that starts the link between official ranks and finery color. Later, the Emperor Wen set crimson as the martial clothing while purple as the servant clothing. It is recorded that the left and right chambers guards, martial guards, duke generals and generals wear martial crowns, crimson court robes, sword, pendant and ribbon. Servants wear hood, purple clothing, loose trousers and golden hawkbill with armour. Court generals, chamber guards, dining hall guards and guards of the prince wear the martial crowns, crimson court robes, sword, pendant and ribbon. And servants wear hood, purple clothing, loose trousers and golden hawkbill with armour. Crimson and purple are the major colors of all official martial clothing. *The Carriage Flags and Finery Annals of The Old Tang Book* states that the officials over the fifth class all dress in crimson and purple. However, books in the Sui Dynasty show different ideas. *The Etiquette Annals of The Sui Book* says that in 605 AD, the officials over the fifth class are required to dress in crimson and purple, while in 611 AD, officials going on an expedition together with the emperor shall wear martial clothing. Ordinary people shall dress in other five colors no matter they are noble or humble. Officials over the fifth class shall dress in purple while the other classes shall dress in crimson and green. And the official historian dress in cyan, the ordinary people in white, the butcher and businessman in black and the soldier in yellow.

Table 3: The finery colors of the kings, dukes and officials in the Sui Dynasty

Items	Patter and color			Occasions
Robes and crown	Cyan pearl and streamer with nine silk threads	Cyan silk ornaments near ears		Appointment of feudal kings, dukes and pioneering dukes, tribute, court meeting, wedding, and three dual ministers' escorting of worship
	Dark-black clothing	Light-red gown		
	White yarn and unlined underwear	Cyan collar	Cyan cuff, edging and front piece	
Robes with ornaments	Cyan silk ornaments near ears	Dark-black clothing	Light-red gown	The infante, three dual minsters, dukes, Marquis, earl, Viscount, baron and officials ranking from the third class to the fifth class
	White yarn and unlined underwear	Unlined underwear and cyan collar	Cyan cuff, edging and front piece	
	Belt with natural color	Vermilion silk outside, the upper clothing is vermilion while the rest is green		
	Ribbon with natural color, vertical silk, dark black outside while yellow inside, the link threads are all cyan silk			
Crown for peerage	Dark-black tassel without streamer	Dark-black clothing, gown without ornamentation	White tough silk and unlined underwear	Officials ranking over the ninth class, escorting of worship
	Cyan collar, edging and front piece		The link threads are all cyan silk	
Court clothing	Crimson yarn and unlined clothing	Crimson yarn is over the knee	Officials ranking over the fifth class, escorting of worship, court meeting and other big events	
	White yarn and unlined underwear	Black collar, edging and front piece		
Crown for martial officials	Crimson court clothing		Military officials like left and right chambers guards, martial guards and generals, and servants	

Table 4: The ribbon colors representing 12 ranks in the Sui Dynasty

The emperor	Dark-black silk threads and double ribbons	Six colors: dark black, yellow, red, white, light blue, green, pure dark black body
The prince	Vermilion ribbon	Four colors: red, white, light blue, livor, pure vermilion body
The infante		Four colors: yellow, red, pure vermilion body and light red silk
Three ducal ministers	Black and yellow ribbon	Four colors: green, purple, yellow, light blue, pure green body and yellow silk
Feudal lord kings		Four colors: red, livor, yellow, light blue, pure vermilion body and silk
Duke	Dark-black and vermilion ribbon	Four colors: red, livor, dark black, light blue, pure vermilion body and dark black silk
Marquis, earl	Cyan and vermilion ribbon	Four colors: cyan, red, white, light blue, pure vermilion body and cyan silk
Viscount, baron	Pure vermilion ribbon	Three colors: cyan, white, red, pure vermilion body and cyan silk
Officials ranking over the second class	and purple ribbon	Four colors: light red, purple, red, yellow, pure purple body and silk
The third-class officials	Livor and purple ribbon	Four colors: purple, livor, yellow, light-blue, pure purple body and livor silk
The forth-class officials	Cyan ribbon	Three colors: cyan, red, white and pure cyan body
The fifth-class officials	Jet-black ribbon	Two colors: cyan, livor and pure livor body

Construction of the red finery system in the Tang Dynasty

Similar to the Sui Dynasty, the Tang Dynasty also worships the earth virtue and the yellow color. However, to be exact, the real color presents ochre and red has always been one of the dominating colors among royal family. According to *The Carriage and Dress Annals of The Old Book of Tang History*, the formal dresses of Tang emperors include crown clothing, coronal clothing, and robes crowns, among which crown clothing ranks the top and is mainly wore in some crucial occasions such as the Heaven Worshipping Ceremony. It can be classified as fur clothing, robes and crowns, Bi crowns, Cui crowns, Xiu crowns, and dark-black crowns. Following the tradition since the Han dynasty, its primary color is mingled with black series (dark black, black), red series (light red, vermilion, red) and white, with the decoration of a little bit cyan, livor, green, yellow and light blue. Its six kinds share the similar color and their major difference lies on the ornaments. In *Officials Records of The Old Book of Tang History*, “you are supposed to wear yellow dresses and hold scarlet flags.” With time going on, the common people were forbidden to wear red or yellow dresses and they were for royal families only. In *Emperor Gaozong Records of The Old Book of Tang History*, Emperor Gaozong once published an imperial decree, saying that “the ordinary people who broadly wore violet or scarlet dresses and the businessmen who dared to hold lavish funerals and exceeded the regulations would be strictly punished in order to prevent them from doing this again.” It is found that red, yellow and purple were not only independent from the five major colors, but superior to the other. Later, Empress Wu Zetian ascends the throne. In *Empress Wu Zetian Records of The New Book of Tang History*, the eve before Wu Zetian’s enthronement, she forces all officials to say that the phoenix and red-winged finch are in the court. Then, Empress Wu

Zetian “announced amnesty, changed the dynasty title to Zhou and claimed to be the Holy Empress. The color of the flag should be crimson.” She initiated to bestow a reward of using purple and crimson for the officials. *The Carriage and Dress Annals* states that “in May of the first year of Yanzai, Empress Wu Zetian sent out purple dresses to the higher rank officials.” Since then, the color of crimson and purple were used to stand for the officials.

Ranking lower than the crown robes, the coronal robes contain tall crown with black hood and crimson clothing. Their major colors show black series and red series, namely crimson and vermilion, while the crowns for robes show simpler colors -- red series (crimson) and black-white series (plain color, white and jet-black). Generally speaking, the robes of the Tang emperors retain the traditional color system and red is still one of the dominating colors among the royal family. As for the robes of the prince, they include robes crown, court robes and the crown for pilgrimage with three chomas in accordance with the *Wude Annals*. Their major colors are red series and black-white series while partial ornaments are cyan and green and ribbons are red, white, light blue or livor. The overall colors of the Tang female robes are very simple. The major one is cyan series while the ornament colors are black red and vermilion.

In 621, the fourth year of Wude, emperor Gaozu of the Tang dynasty started to change the old finery colors of different official ranks which derived from the emperor Yang of Sui dynasty. And after emperor Taizong, Gaozong and Wenzong, the finery colors had changed seven times totally. Although these colors were very similar, it reflected the high attention to obsession of hierarchy behind the clothing. And every reformation of finery colors of different official ranks went with more details, from three ranks of colors (purple, vermilion, yellow) in Gaozu’ fourth year of Wude to five ranks of colors (purple, scarlet, green, cyan, yellow) in the period of Gaozong in which more detailed ranks were represented with differences in brightness. *A New Book of Tang’s History-Annals of Official Garments* records: “The finery color of emperor is crimson and yellow which can’t be used for any other people. The princes and officials above third-level rank can use purple number two; above fifth-level can use vermilion; above sixth-level can use yellow; sixth and seventh-level use green; eighth and ninth-level use cyan, and then purple is for third-level; scarlet is for fourth-level; light purple-red is for fifth-level; dark green is for sixth-level; light green is for seventh-level; dark cyan is for eighth-level; light cyan is for ninth-level, and yellow is for exiled officials and the common people.”, in which red-colored items occupied the main position but gradually withdrew from the finery colour usage for emperor and officials above the third-level.

Since the Han Dynasty, Buddhism, as an exotic religion, began to develop in China, especially the Chan sect. At the same time, the Buddhist thoughts and its secularization became an excellent tool for rulers to stabilize the country. However, the five colors of Buddhism correspond to earth, water, fire, wind and vanity while the five colors in China conforming to the five elements, that is, metal, wood, water, fire and earth. In other words, it’s a view of the world that Buddhists see, combined not as close as those colors in China. What can be seen from such caves as Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, Yulin Caves and Xiqianfodong Caves is that many Bodhisattvas or figures in important events wore red costumes, which may have something to do with the technology of cinnabar, a fossil fuel at that time. But it is not difficult to conclude that the red color was admired and respected in the Buddhist paintings.

Conclusion

It is difficult for common people to see the emperor and senior officials in yellow and purple, instead, they envied and pursued the color red and green worn by medium officials, thus the whole society following the red. There are a large number of verses describing the folk love of red, including “The crimson clothes fit me well”, “Fish dived dotted with platinum, while magpie flied with red ribbon around the body”, “The new bronze symbol has not been written in red” and “The servant is wearing a fire red gown”.

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