

# On the Change of the Female Status in the Tang Dynasty from the Horse-riding Tomb Figurine

Bosen Zhang

Department of History and Cultural Studies, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou,  
Gansu, 730070, China

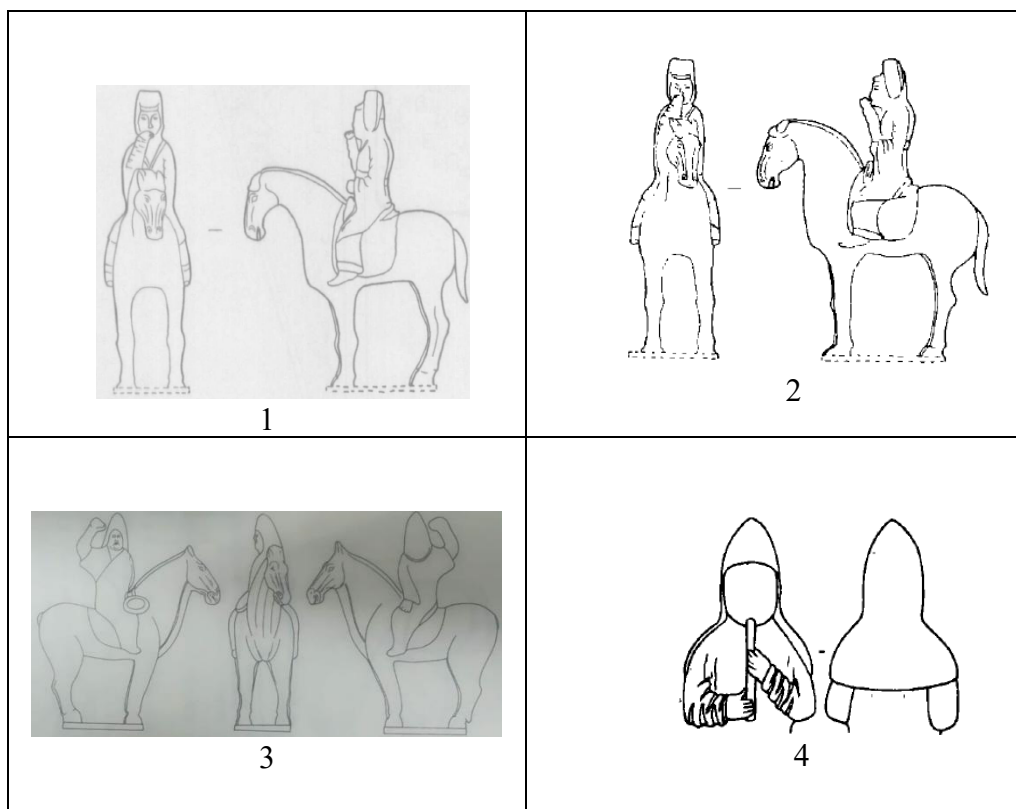
**Abstract.** The Tang Dynasty was at the peak of the development of China's feudal society. The powerful and unified multi-ethnic centralization, highly developed material economic conditions, free and open-minded all-inclusive ideological and cultural concepts together constituted the heyday of the Tang Dynasty for more than 200 years. The riding vogue prevailing during this period was an epitome of the social life in the Tang Dynasty. Through the archaeological typology method, the study on the horse-riding tomb figurines unearthed from the graves of the two ancient capitals in the Tang Dynasty was conducted, which could summarize the general development characteristics of the horse-riding fashion in the Tang Dynasty, further cast a glimpse of some aspects of the social life and rendered a more intuitive understanding of the social development of the Tang Dynasty. This paper intends to illustrate the change of female social status in the Tang Dynasty and its causes and significance based on the horse-riding fashion of the Tang Dynasty, taking the horse-riding figurines unearthed in the Tang Dynasty as the example.

**Keywords:** The Tang Dynasty; female; horse-riding figurines; status.

## 1. The Horse-riding Fashion of Female in the Tang Dynasty

Some of the horse-riding figurines unearthed from the tombs and depicted in the figurines the murals of the tombs of the Tang Dynasty are female riders. Through their characteristics in the aspects of style, modeling and posture, it is clearly seen that these female riders come from different classes in the society, ranging from the noble ladies to the maids and servants. Judging from the literature and material data currently, female horse-riding in the Tang Dynasty has become quite popular, which is not an accidental phenomenon, but a common social custom. Women in the Tang Dynasty were less bound by feudal etiquette. They were able to participate in the administration and discussion of politics as men, have certain social status, and get more involved in various social activities.

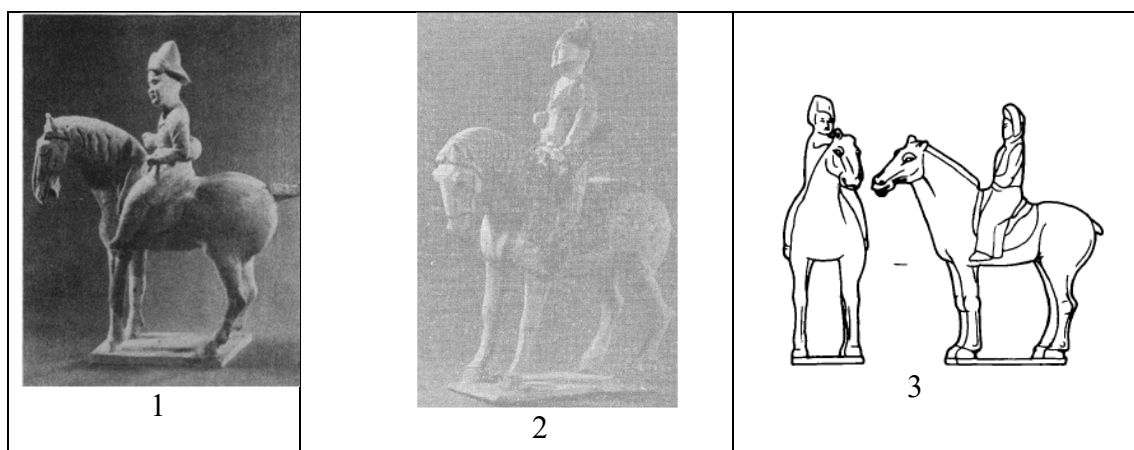
As far as the physical data currently available are concerned, the earliest image of female horse-riding is a female figurine playing the lute in the form of yellow glazed pottery unearthed in the Sui tomb, now in the Palace Museum. The rider has an updo and kerchief tying in the front, wearing a narrow-sleeve garment and blusher with a high-waist long skirt. Both of her hands hold the pipa as if she was playing it. The female figurine straddles on the back of the horse that is in yellow glaze with sinewy limbs, standing upright. The horse head droops in a submissive and respectful posture. In the Tang Dynasty, there were a lot of horse-riding female figurines. As can be seen in the systematization aforementioned, the riding maids are found in the burial of different periods in the Tang Dynasty, from a small amount of horse-riding maids in early Tang to the rich and various types of travel, dance, sports horse-riding maids etc. in the glorious age and middle period of Tang. These variously dressed, vivid and distinctive riding maids are the vivid reflection of ever-improving female status in the Tang Dynasty with the development of the society.



1. Unearthed in the Cui's tomb of King Xiang (title: peace)'s wife (performing figurine); 2. Unearthed in the Tang's tomb of King Xiang (title: peace)'s wife (playing hichiriki figurine); 3. Unearthed from Li Quanli's tomb (drumming figurine); 4. Unearthed from Liu Kai's tomb (blowing clarinet figurine)

What is worth mentioning is the change of female riding images in the Tang Dynasty. According to the records in Old Tang Dynasty History, Vehicle and Trapping Notes, in the early Tang Dynasty of Wude and Zhenguan periods, "the imperial equestrians, following the old systems of Qi and Sui, mostly wore the Mili" [1] "Mili" refers to the yarn to cover the head and body used by women going out, also called "Weimi". In that period, women needed to seal themselves tightly before mounting the horse. The glazed pottery horse-riding female figurine unearthed in the tomb of Zhang Shigui in the Tang Dynasty is an image with the head wearing Mili. After Yonghui, "all used curtained hats, the dress pulling to the neck to show slightly gradually" [2]. After Zetian's reign, "curtained hats were in the vogue, and the system of Mili was dying away" [3]. After Yonghui period of Emperor Gaozong, Mili gradually disappeared, and curtained hat became popular. Such hat was an improved edition. It was made in two shapes, one with a high top and a wide brim, the silk screen mesh falling from the brim to the neck, and the other was a brimless bonnet made of cloth and silk with the hat shawl falling to the neck, and a bamboo hat added to the top. The horse-riding female figurines unearthed from the tombs of Li Siben and Zheng Rentai in Tang all had such a hat; in the early days of Kaiyuan period, "the horsemen from the palace all wore Hu hats with pretty makeups and no obstacles. The families of gentry and civilian were all imitating, and the system of curtained hat was never used. Very soon women again also galloped showing buns, or wearing husband's clothes and boots. Regardless of superiors and inferiors, inside and outside, everyone was always the same" [4]. In the early years of Kaiyuan period, the curtained hat withdrew from the historical stage, and women began to wear Hu hats in going out. Hu hats referred to the ones popular in the Persian, Arabian and the Western regions, as well as the minority areas in the northern and southern regions of China and other places, mainly including the pointed top felt cap, the four-eave felt cap, the black wool felt cap etc. The three-color glazed pottery horse-riding female figurine buried in the tomb of Princess Yongtai presented a rider image of a court lady with a bright makeup wrapped with Hu clothing, showing the shift of social custom to that in the glorious age of Tang Dynasty featured by the style of Hu hats, Hu clothing and Hu horse. The constant changes in the wearing of cap and gown shows

the courage of the Tang women to pursue fashion and freedom, as well as the tolerance in the society and the change of women's status.



1. Unearthed from Zhang Shigui's tomb (wearing a cage crown); 2. Unearthed from Zheng Rentai's tomb (military rider figurine); 3. Unearthed from mural tomb of Tang in Shaanxi Cotton No. 10 Factory (wearing a cage crown)

## **2. Manifestations of the Change of Female Status in the Tang Dynasty**

Women of different classes were able to travel on horseback, reflecting the improvement of female status in the Tang Dynasty. In addition, some other phenomena in the society also reflected the change of female status at that time:

Firstly, the phenomenon of female participation and discussion in politics was relatively common. The general mood of society in the Tang Dynasty was very open, and the constraints of feudal ethical code were relatively loose, which enabled more women in the Dynasty to affect state politics in a direct or indirect manner. Some famous examples included the Empress Zhangsun and virtuous Princess consort Xu Hui, and the Empress Wu Zetian, the outstanding female political participant surely. Her appearance also encouraged the enthusiasm of royal women in political participation and discussion. In the Tang Dynasty, women participated in a wide range of political affairs, including choosing talents, torture, repairs of decrees, palace coup, economic and cultural development, foreign policy formulation, and even fighting in wars.

Second was the autonomy of marriage. Women in the Tang Dynasty were free to choose their marriage partners and to dissolve their marriage relationships. It is stated in Household and Marriage, Volume 14 of Laws of the Tang Dynasty that, "The humble and young children should follow their elders in engagement. In the case of taking a wife on one's own, the marriage is legalized. Otherwise, they should follow the elders and brothers. Anyone violating will be punished by one hundred bludgeons." [5] This has legally protected the right and freedom of women to choose their own marriage partners. Due to the openness and tolerance of the social environment and the influence by the customs and habits of the northern minorities, the concept of chastity in the Tang Dynasty was relatively plain and thin, and the people then had no intentions of disrespecting women's remarriage.

Next, in terms of cultural education, the Sui and Tang dynasties presented a period of great development and prosperity of China's feudal culture education. With the decline of the power by a family of influence of the Wei and Jin dynasties and the rise of the imperial examination system, education broke the previous rigorous hierarchy restrictions and began to open to all levels of society. Although the learning contents of women in the Tang Dynasty were still subject to traditional doctrines, they also broadened their horizons and improved their self-cultivation in the learning process.

The change of female status in the Tang Dynasty is also indicated in the broad sports and cultural activities. Women participating in sports and cultural activities went from empress dowagers to the civilians and even prostitutes, covering all levels of society. The sports cultural activities also

included a variety of items, such as polo, Cuju, the game of go, archery, swinging, and boat race. In the sports horse-riding figurines mentioned above, there were a lot of polo-playing maids who wore easy-to-sport Hu clothing and ride across the horseback. They were galloping on the ball park and enjoying the merry feelings of the competitive activities. At the same time, these sports cultural events had enriched their connotations due to the participation of women, adding the different charm [6].

The status of women in the Tang Dynasty had been significantly improved. Although they were still subordinate in the feudal patriarchal society, they had gained more freedom. What is embodied in the horse-riding figurines is the change of the consistent lady's maid image of standing in low eyebrows and head formerly and demonstration of the spirit of their outburst enthusiasm, openness, bravery and self-assertion. Women in the Tang Dynasty actively participated in all aspects of politics and social life, demonstrated their literary and artistic talents in different fields. So to speak, no women in a dynasty have such high social statuses in the history of our nation.

The open and inclusive ethnic policy of the Tang Dynasty and the diversified ethnic culture formed by it changed some traditional aesthetic habits and ideas of the Han people, and the "egoistic" Han national culture had truly taken up foreign cultures of the minority regions and even overseas, which was the ideological guarantee for the change of female status in the Tang Dynasty.

Some minority women had always been the same as men, fighting against the tough living environment in the minority regions, which demanded that they had strong physiques, rather than the traditional Han women who advocated "a pretty girl of humble birth", "rarely known due to the cultivation in purdah"; they lived and spoke in freedom, their pursued the freedom of life, and they could even step on horses and go out to battle when needed.

Influenced by this culture, some Han women no longer looked "demure like delicate flowers, acted like weak willow branches trembling in the wind" [7]. They actively participated in physical exercise, they wanted to change the feminine body and show a strong and confident outlook. After the whole society accepted such culture, the female's esthetics naturally started to appreciate the confident women with strong bodies from the keenness on the delicate ones who were "feminine and easy to be shy" gradually, which provided the thought foundation to the change in female figurine from thin to fat and also came to form and develop into the atmosphere and environment in the society.

### **3. Significance of the Change of Female Status in the Tang Dynasty**

The formation of thousands of years of feudal traditional culture formation stresses "Lack of talent in a woman is a virtue" [8], and women should abide by "Three Obediences and Four Virtues". This is actually the vindication of the imperial power, patriarchy and the authority of husband by the feudal philosophy since the Song Dynasty, just to bind the vast majority of women. In fact, in the period of two Han dynasties, the rulers emphasized women's morality and appearance, dignity and gentleness, while in the Wei Jin and Six Dynasties, many talented women born into the upper class were edified and guided by their fathers and brothers, starting to create poetry and prose. A large number of talented women were produced in the period of Sui and Tang Dynasties. They had made remarkable achievements in the literary and art circles, far more than those in the previous times.

When talented women gained people's recognition and attention, the appreciation of women was not just on looks and virtue, but more on their inner nature. New Songs from the Jade Terrace praises the belles must be "open and cheerful with fluent thinking, wonderful interpretation of articles, especially good at poems. Colored glazed inkstone cartridges are carried all day, and emerald brush utensils never stay away from hands... And such are the beauties, and such are their talents." [9].

The most representative of the Tang Dynasty talented women was the prostitutes in brothels. At that time, great poets, the best prose writers, celebrities from all walks of life mostly had close contact with girls in the whorehouse. Those successful candidates in the highest imperial examinations "attached importance to words rather than classics, upheld talent rather than etiquette." [10] Their philandering behaviors were widespread in society. Many poets also expressed their romantic feelings in the erotic verses. They were attracted to those women with outstanding talents, admired their beauty, understood their emotions and respected them with mutual affinity.



Therefore, such a trend was formed in the Tang Dynasty society: the appreciation of women was more focused on the discovery of their inherent talent and accomplishments, rather than the appearance of certain beauty as the so-called appearance was easy to get old. Though the face is good, it is difficult to last, but only talent can stay in the world.

Of course, first of all, from the perspective of marriage customs, ancient China attaches great importance to the procedures of engagement and marriage. In the feudal society, it is seen from each item of the “Six Courtesies” modality that, whether the name-inquiry, selecting date, or sending dowry, fetching the bride, men are in the absolute initiative status, and women are mostly in the passive position to bear with less initiative. Thirdly, in terms of the form of marriage, when young men and women get married, men “take in” and women “marry off”, which clearly shows the marriage concept of “male standard” and “husband standard”. Moreover, although many young men and women pursue independent marriages, parents are still an indispensable part of their children’s marriages and still have a great voice.

From the perspective of marriage, in feudal times, marriage is more about a perfect match for the family. From the Wei, Jin Northern and Southern Dynasties, the system of hereditary aristocracy and traditional concept of gens influenced the class consciousness in the Tang Dynasty so that marriage based on family status was still prevalent at the time. On the one hand, the decline of the gentry in the Tang Dynasty led to the rise of the common landlord and the sense of hierarchy in marriages was impacted by the reality. On the other hand, the outlook on family status was still very strong, continuing in the real marriage. The concept of family status in marriage confined the marriages of noble women to a particular class.

From the perspective of female participation in political affairs. Although Wu Zetian set a good example for women all over the world, the problem that women cannot be generally involved in politics still could not be changed completely. Women were generally in lower positions, and the number was far behind that of men. The traditional concept of male superiority was still deeply rooted so that women were still in a position of being oppressed and dominated, and subordinate to men.

Finally, on the aspect of education. Although the imperial examination system provided a relatively fair environment for the lower-level intellectuals for personnel selection, even in the reign of Wu Zetian, no women gained fame through such way of imperial examination. Most women were not able to directly participate in the feudal culture learning and education, but acquired some cultural knowledge intuitively out of their own interests.

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