

BOOK REVIEWS

Empire of Style: Silk and Fashion in Tang China

By BuYun Chen. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019.
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Reviewed by Guojun Wang*

Vanderbilt University

*Corresponding author. Email: guojun.wang@vanderbilt.edu.

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Despite a large number of existing studies on China's clothing and textile history, few book-length works have addressed the role of clothing and fashion in premodern Chinese society. BuYun Chen's book, *Empire of Style*, depicts a fascinating world of clothing and fashion in Tang China and makes contributions to the studies of clothing history, art history, and cultural history in general.

The Tang dynasty well affords such a study because many prominent issues regarding clothing and fashion emerged in Tang society, such as sumptuary legislation, fashionable clothing that made use of elements that seemed foreign, the gendered meaning of textile production, the interaction between fashion, literature, and artistic representation, and so on. Chen's book addresses all those issues. The word "style" in the title encompasses textile patterns, fashion styles, styles of representation, and the social meanings of styles.

The book diverges from the conventional understanding of fashion as the expression of modernity (introduction). It identifies "two motors that powered fashion": textile industry and aesthetic play, which Chen defines as the "ongoing engagement between Tang subjects and their visual and material world" (9). That approach allows the author to study a historical society, use variegated materials not limited to clothing proper, and to focus on aesthetic play as a meaning-making practice involving weavers and pattern designers, painters and artisans, poets, moralizing scholars, different types of audiences, and the state.

The book is firmly based on materials about textile history, but the main issues explored go beyond that. The two parts of the book respectively discuss fashion in the Tang empire and different forms of aesthetic play. Chapter 1 delineates the cosmopolitan empire that contained textile production and fashion consumption. It weaves together various factors including the Tang government's military expansion, material and cultural communication between China and central Asia, Chang'an as a metropolitan city and its multi-ethnic residents, and the importance of silk used for taxation and as currency. Within that historical context, Chapter 2 discusses sumptuary regulation. As the chapter details, Tang sumptuary regulation was based on hierarchies of social status and driven by concerns about excess and extravagance, which was exacerbated by the An Lushan rebellion and the central government's subsequent loss of control over north China. The chapter discusses the Tang state's attempts to control textile

and fashion through legislation, administration of market and trade, and discourses—particularly those against foreign styles. Surprisingly, women's work and fashion were frequently the target of criticism and discipline.

Chapters 3–5 (Part 2) focus on three forms of aesthetic play: image making/representation, silk and design, and poetics of fashion. Using a rich body of visual and sculptural materials, Chapter 3 discusses the clothing and body of the Tang beauty as a constructed model. The chapter suggests that the prevalence of foreign dress (*hufu*) for women “signaled the rise of a playful conception of clothing” (96). It also shows that both the critique of foreign dress and the template of the plump Tang Beauty were closely tied to the An Lushan rebellion and were employed as moral and political commentaries. Moving on to silk and design, Chapter 4 documents the geographical changes of tax and tribute silk production and different design patterns. It also discusses persons—the importance of weavers, the intention of the fashion designers—and ornament as a medium of cultural and social experience. Revolving around the desire for “keeping up with the times,” Chapter 5 analyzes the basic lexicon for fashion coined by post-rebellion poets such as Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi in the Yuanhe era. The chapter first discusses the craving for poetic innovation and the political orientation of the “Yuanhe poetic style”; it then uses some poems to show that through writing about fashion and women's work, post-rebellion poets expressed their deep concerns about “the relationship between desire, material life, and historical change” (167). The book includes an appendix on textile basics in traditional China.

The book's interdisciplinary method is inspiring for scholars working in different fields. The author makes use of paintings, excavated clothes and sculptures, government documents, and literary writings, all of which inform her interpretation of fashion as textile production as well as aesthetic play. Reading Tang poetry together with related sartorial images is refreshing (especially in Chapter 5); the approach helps us imagine new ways to study literature and material culture for other topics, such as the world depicted in *Honglou meng*.

Many topics discussed in this book shed light on issues in the subsequent periods. For example, Tang scholars' concerns about foreign dress resonate with a long tradition of dealing with the cultural and ethnic other, which figured more prominently during the “conquest dynasties.” The gendered imagination of women's work (or womanly work) in Tang China continued to influence similar discourses in Ming-Qing China. In that sense, the book provides many useful reference points for studies of Chinese society after the Tang dynasty.

Empire of Style raises issues worth further study. One example involves the issue of time. Chapter 5 is premised on a complicated relationship between time in fashion, poetry, and history, particularly evidenced in the phrase *shishizhuang*. Paradoxically, whereas the Yuanhe poets valued the newness in poetic style, they criticized the efforts to look current, which they deemed to mean different and foreign—symptomatic of the failing Tang empire. Since the book focuses on the post-rebellion Tang world, I wonder whether and how the An Lushan rebellion influenced the ties between time and fashion. In premodern China, clothing was always a marker of time and a way to capture time lost. That issue has larger significances can probably be addressed in further studies.

Starting with a captivating description of the Tang Barbie, *Empire of Style* unveils the multi-dimensional sartorial landscape of Tang China. It is a rich book with many seminal discussions, a fine example of scholarship on the cultural history of traditional China.