

Han Dynasty costume aesthetics and class

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Abstract

Based on the socio-economic and ideological background, this paper explores the characteristics of clothing across different classes and the cultural significance behind them. First of all, the civil officials' costumes exhibit a majestic and magnificent style, reflecting the authority and nobility of the literati class. Secondly, military costumes are characterized by grandeur and majesty, emphasizing the might and strength of soldiers. Thirdly, merchant clothing displays characteristics of extravagance and luxury, reflecting the wealth of the merchant class and their pursuit of a luxurious life. Finally, the clothing of ordinary people is mainly simple and modest, highlighting the simple lifestyle and pragmatic attitude of the common people. The analysis of these clothing characteristics reveals that socio-economic background and ideological concepts have a profound influence on the clothing styles of different classes, embodying the spirit of the times and aesthetic pursuits. In general, the clothing culture of the Han Dynasty not only possesses unique artistic value but is also an important part of traditional Chinese culture, having a profound impact on the clothing culture of later generations.

Keywords Han dynasty; Trappings; Aesthetic culture

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Han dynasty clothing had a profound impact on Chinese culture, reflecting social hierarchy, identity, and status during its time and leaving a lasting imprint on subsequent history. The design and decoration of Han dynasty attire were meticulous, with different styles representing various social classes and statuses. There were clear distinctions in the clothing worn by emperors, officials, merchants, and commoners, which served as symbols of their respective social positions.

Han clothing have been preserved to this day, becoming an integral part of traditional Chinese culture. The impact of Han dynasty attire was significant not only in China but also on the clothing cultures of surrounding regions. Through trade and cultural exchanges, Han dynasty styles spread to various East Asian countries, shaping the fashion trends across the region. The Han dynasty was a crucial period in Chinese history, and its clothing was not merely decorative but also a symbol of historical and cultural significance. For scholars studying Han society, politics, and culture, Han dynasty clothing provides vital insights into the era's social landscape.

1 Social Background

During the Han dynasty, under the guidance of national policies, the economy experienced a prolonged period of recuperation, laying a solid foundation for subsequent prosperity. This series of measures not only effectively promoted economic recovery but also gradually stabilized the Western Han regime. By studying unearthed artifacts and historical documents, we can gain a general understanding of the social life and economic conditions of the time. These artifacts and records reveal that agriculture, handicrafts, and commerce all underwent significant development.

Another significant factor influencing the Han dynasty's economy was the opening of the Silk Road. The formation and development of Han dynasty clothing culture were influenced not only by traditional Chinese culture but also by foreign cultures introduced through the Silk Road. This facilitated the blending of Chinese and foreign cultural elements, encompassing various aspects of Eastern and Western cultural exchange. As a result, Han dynasty clothing began to gradually integrate foreign influences, leading to a transformation in the style of Han dynasty attire.

In terms of ideology and culture, Emperor Wu of Han abolished the Hundred Schools of Thought and exclusively promoted Confucianism, establishing it as the orthodox ideology and securing its dominant position. The purpose of this policy was to maintain his rule. A central concept in ancient Chinese Confucian thought is the "unity of heaven and humanity." Guided by this philosophy, the basic style of Han dynasty clothing was characterized by broad, solemn, and flowing designs.

In addition to the economic foundation, the formation of the historical characteristics of Han dynasty clothing culture was also closely tied to the strict feudal hierarchical system. At that time, individuals of different social statuses or official ranks had strict requirements and distinctions in their attire.^[1] For instance, while black was the predominant color in Han dynasty clothing, distinctions in rank were evident in the patterns on the clothing, with specific patterns symbolizing social status and rank. The clothing system functioned as an alternative form of hierarchical structure. However, by the late Eastern Han period, the influence of the clothing system on society

had diminished significantly.

2 Characteristics and Aesthetics of Clothing Across Different Social Strata

Clothing is not only a tangible material product but also carries cultural, social, and individual identity implications. As part of daily life, clothing serves to protect, warm, or cover the body. Simultaneously, it is a form of cultural expression, conveying the cultural information of specific social and historical periods through colors, patterns, and designs. Clothing reflects people's aesthetic values and cultural concepts, and it also bears historical, religious, or ethnic cultural symbols. Clothing from different cultural backgrounds displays diversity, illustrating cultural richness and variety. Moreover, clothing reflects social structure, identity, status, and profession. In different social classes, clothing often has distinct differences and serves as an external manifestation of social identity and status. The social aspect of clothing makes it a means of social interaction, allowing people to convey their identity, status, and social roles through their attire.

From the unearthed cultural relics, it is evident that the silk weaving industry in the Han dynasty was highly developed. For instance, the silk fabrics unearthed in the Mawangdui Han Tomb in Changsha include varieties such as silk, Luo yarn, brocade, embroidery, and Qi. Due to high demand and trade along the Silk Road, the silk weaving industry thrived during the Han dynasty. The characteristics of Han dynasty clothing can be classified according to the attire of scribes, military soldiers, merchants, and commoners.

2.1 Magnificent and Majestic Civil Official Attire

Civil officials had distinct attire for court and everyday life, as their roles in the court did not align with their daily activities. In the Han dynasty, civil officials' court robes and casual wear consisted of single-layer garments and robes.^[2] There were two types of single-layer garments: curved hem and straight hem. In addition to single-layer garments, robes were also commonly worn in daily life. Based on the shape of the robe's lapel, they could be categorized into two types: curved hem robes and straight hem robes. The curved hem robe inherited the deep garment style popular during the Warring States period, with the extended front lapel wrapped around the body to the back, a style commonly seen in the Western Han period. The straight hem robe had a straight lapel and was shorter in length compared to the curved hem robe. The front lapel extended straight from the collar diagonally to the armpit and down to the hem.^[3]

The robes worn by civil officials featured square collars and broad designs, commonly known as "Confucian robes," which were highly favored by scholars. These robes had to adhere to strict etiquette and moral constraints, reflecting the officials' roles within the feudal system. However, in their daily lives, these officials also valued personal comfort and ease, leading to clothing choices that might prioritize comfort over strict adherence to ceremonial norms. This interplay between the rigid feudal system's ceremonial culture and the practicality of clothing resulted in attire that needed to satisfy personal needs while still conforming to feudal etiquette constraints.



Figure 1: An official Han wearing a jade ribbon with a Liang crown

Under feudal rule, clothing was an expression of etiquette, so whether in court or daily life, the attire of Han dynasty civil officials displayed grandeur and solemnity, along with a sense of stability. Civil officials' official robes were predominantly black, a color that was seen at the time as a symbol of solemnity and seriousness, conveying stability and dignity. Over time, by the Eastern Han period, the colors of civil officials' clothing became increasingly ornate. According to historical records, Han dynasty civil officials often wore robes and hats, with distinctions in their attire mainly reflected through their headwear and sashes, indicating their rank and status.

Different official positions had distinct types of crowns and hats. By the late Eastern Han period, the aesthetic characteristics of Han dynasty clothing had also transformed, with the features of the attire gradually shifting from grandeur to elegance. During this time, society experienced severe turmoil, and the traditional feudal ceremonial system gradually collapsed. As a result, headscarves, originally worn by commoners, were increasingly adopted by civil officials.

2.2 Grand and majestic military attire

Military attire during the Han dynasty was primarily divided into two categories: the armor worn on the battlefield and regular uniforms worn in daily military life. Armor was not only used in



Figure 2: An official Han wearing a jade ribbon with a Liang crown

battle but also appeared in important ceremonies. The everyday attire of soldiers included “dan yi” (simple garments) and “ku” (trousers). The “ku” in Han attire refers to trousers without a crotch. These regular uniforms were often modified for practicality and ease of combat. Despite these modifications, military attire overall exuded a grand and magnificent character. Additionally, the color scheme of military uniforms was predominantly red, which was markedly different from the black attire of civil officials. In the society of that time, red was often seen as a symbol of passion and strength, making it more effective in highlighting the bravery and fighting spirit of the military.

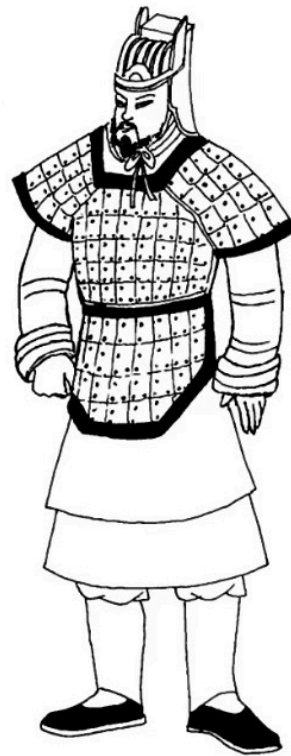
The ceremonial military attire of Han dynasty men differed significantly from their regular attire, adhering to a distinct system that inherited elements from the Qin dynasty. ^[4] This system dictated specific styles and features for ceremonial dress, setting it apart from the more practical garments worn in everyday military life. One notable difference was in the hats worn by military and civil officials. The hats differed in both shape and color, making it easy to distinguish between the two based on their headwear. These differences in attire not only served to visually distinguish different ranks and roles within the government and military but also reinforced the hierarchical structure and the importance of ceremonial practices in the Han dynasty.

2.3 Extravagant and Luxurious Merchant Attire

In theory, merchant attire should not have differed significantly from that of commoners. However, historical records indicate that merchants in the Han dynasty often indulged in extravagant and luxurious dressing habits. They adorned their clothing with embellishments typically reserved for royalty and nobility, challenging traditional symbols of status. This suggests that, in



Figure 3: Pottery painted male



戴武冠披胸甲的将军·汉

Figure 4: General - Han wearing a military crown and a cuirass

their daily lives, merchants pursued a high level of luxury and splendor in their attire.

This pursuit of opulence not only drove the development of Han dynasty clothing culture but also challenged traditional social norms and etiquette to some extent. Despite the sparse historical records on merchant attire, it is known that the extravagant clothing choices of merchants drew the attention of the emperor, leading to the issuance of several decrees prohibiting merchants from wearing excessively lavish and ornate clothing. This reflects the tension between the burgeoning wealth and status of the merchant class and the established social hierarchy, as well as the evolving nature of clothing as a symbol of social status and identity in the Han dynasty.

2.4 Simple and Plain Civilian Attire

The clothing of common people in the Han dynasty was characterized by its simplicity and plainness. Due to their need to engage in farming and manual labor, their clothing was designed primarily for practicality, resulting in a generally rougher appearance. This utilitarian approach to clothing can be seen in the daily life scenes depicted in excavated stone reliefs from the period, which provide a direct glimpse into the lives of common people.

The fabrics used for common people's clothing were typically coarse cloth made from hemp or wool. In the early Han dynasty, these coarse fabrics were usually uncolored, as dyeing was



Figure 5: Merchants

reserved for higher social classes. It wasn't until the late Western Han period that commoners were permitted to wear colored fabrics. The patterns on common people's clothing were minimalistic, conveying a sense of heaviness and simplicity. Whether observed in the excavated stone reliefs or Han figurines, the clothing worn by common people in their daily lives reflects a straightforward and practical aesthetic, emphasizing functionality over formality or ornamentation. This attire not only highlights the economic and social constraints faced by the lower classes but also provides insight into the everyday realities of life during the Han dynasty.

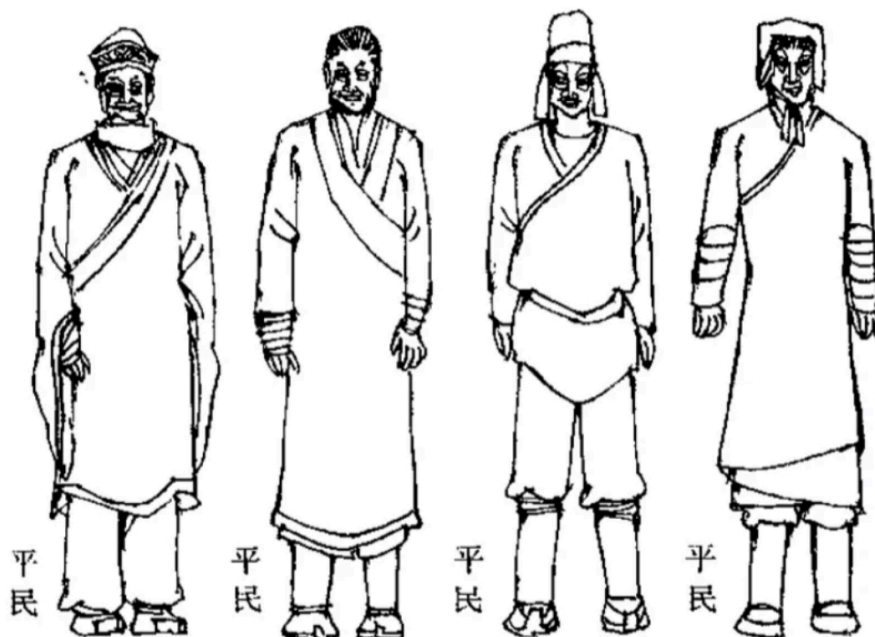


Figure 6: Civilian



Figure 7: Cultivation map (detail)

3 Conclusion

The strengthening of national power, territorial expansion, and economic prosperity during the Han Dynasty led to a flourishing and thriving nation. This period of prosperity and strength directly influenced the lifestyle of Han Dynasty people, making it more diverse and rich. Against this backdrop, people's pursuit of quality of life and aesthetics gradually intensified, and their social status and economic level generally improved, giving them more choices and opportunities in their attire. Not only the nobility but also ordinary people began to pay attention to their everyday clothing.

The attire of Han dynasty civil officials exhibited a majestic and imposing demeanor, reflecting the unique aesthetics and cultural characteristics of that era. In the Western Han period, the clothing of civil officials was primarily black, symbolizing solemnity and dignity. By the Eastern Han period, the designs of their attire became more elaborate, with increasingly vibrant and diverse colors.

The design style of military attire in the Han dynasty exuded a grand and majestic aura. These garments were meticulously crafted to express the strength and dignity of the military, highlighting their formidable presence and imposing stature. Additionally, the design of military caps was ingeniously executed, combining the simplicity of martial caps with the ornate elegance of ceremonial headgear, creating a distinct contrast that further emphasized the characteristics of military attire.

During the Han dynasty, merchants displayed a generally lavish aesthetic in their attire, closely tied to their extravagant lifestyle. Due to their accumulated wealth and relatively privileged living conditions, merchants surpassed ordinary citizens and even some officials and nobility in their pursuit of exquisite clothing. Consequently, these merchants often disregarded the Han dynasty's clothing regulations, boldly adorning their attire with various patterns and striving for elegance. Through these garments, merchants not only showcased their wealth but also expressed their unique understanding and pursuit of beauty.

The luxurious attire of merchants reflected their unique social status and lifestyle. Their fashion style was not only a display of personal taste but also a declaration of their social position.

This opulent and lavish aesthetic not only advanced the development of Han Dynasty clothing culture but also challenged traditional social norms and ceremonial practices to some extent.

Commoners in Han society occupied the lower strata, and their clothing was simple and unpretentious, embodying a rustic and substantial aesthetic. This style reflected the living conditions and social status of the common people, but it also showcased their unique appreciation for life. From Han Dynasty stone reliefs and figurines, we can strongly sense the ordinary people's love for life. Despite limited material conditions, they still expressed a pursuit of beauty in the details of their daily lives. The rhythm of the commoners' lives, like their clothing, was simple yet powerful, full of the genuine texture of life. This natural and authentic aesthetic style was not only an expression of a lifestyle but also a reflection of cultural values. Although Han Dynasty commoners' clothing was simple and unpretentious, it contained rich cultural connotations and aesthetic value. Through these garments, we can see the social stratification of the time and feel the common people's love for life and their pursuit of nature.

By the late Eastern Han Dynasty, society was in turmoil, and the corruption of the court led to the gradual erosion of the ritual and music system. At this time, people's requirements for clothing were no longer primarily aimed at distinguishing between different social statuses but instead focused more on practicality. Therefore, people's choices in clothing were more about comfort and freedom. The transformation in the aesthetics of clothing also gradually shifted from a grand and magnificent style to one that was more comfortable and flowing.

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