

# The New Silk Fashions

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## Introduction

Alongside the global developments in silk production grew a burgeoning desire to wear silk garments. The discoveries of new types of dyeing pigments and weaving techniques encouraged the passion for specific colors and designs, which helped spur on fast-changing trends in fashion. In this lesson, we will discuss the silk fashion that spread to people from an array of different socioeconomic backgrounds in China, New Spain, and Europe. As with the previous lessons, we will only discuss these developments in China and New Spain, and not in Europe, as explained in Reading 1, in order to highlight the polycentric nature of early globalization.

The fashion of wearing silk garments carried meaning beyond simple aesthetics, but represented one's place in the social structure. Clothing served as the primary indicator of one's social rank, for instance. We learned in the first lesson that expensive and rare garments made from silk had long been restricted to noble and elite classes. Into the sixteenth century, the Ming court and Spanish government used clothing codes to differentiate social classes and also to reinforce elite control.

## THE NEW SILK FASHIONS

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But in both places, people also used fashion choices to claim new prestige, social identities, and political authority that silk symbolized. In that way, fashion choices could not just reinforce existing social hierarchies, but challenge or change them. Starting in the sixteenth century, international trade in silks began to influence consumption habits of even ordinary people. Increasing numbers of consumers started purchasing and wearing fashionable silk clothing items that had once been unavailable to them. This increased demand only further fueled the industry, enriching more commoners, and only further fueling the challenges to existing social hierarchies.

Also in both cases, governmental authorities responded to such challenges by issuing laws limiting the clothing choices to preserve the existing social order. Officials in New Spain and scholars in China remained committed to maintaining an ordered and hierarchical society by distinguishing elites by their visual appearance. For the most part, such efforts failed. Silk had become the hot new fashion as non-nobles with access to the cash economy sought to display their ability to access expanding global markets.

In this lesson, we will focus on two interrelated topics: the expanding fashion of wearing silk and increasing governmental regulations aiming to restrict that fashion. As we move through this lesson, it is important to consider both how silk reflected or challenged social hierarchies, and how the authority of each empire was either enhanced or weakened by the popularity of silks. The answers, it turns out, are not as simple as it might seem. As we will see, while it just a form of cloth, silk was critical to the function of political and economic power, since it symbolized how people understand, claimed, and challenged their social status relative to others around them.



**Dress of the Ming Imperial Court,  
16 or 17<sup>th</sup> century**

## Key Terms:

Zhu Yuanzhang

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*The Book of Guanzi*

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Sumptuary Laws

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*Suzhou*

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*Jin ping mei*

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Oaxaca

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Philip II

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Philip III

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*Limpieza de sangre*

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Casta Paintings





**15<sup>th</sup> Century Ming China**

# China

Starting in ancient China, the imperial government put all people into one of four hierarchical social categories: from top to bottom, these were the scholar-officials, peasant and farmers, craftsmen and artisans, and merchants. The social category to which one belonged determined one's tax rate, career opportunities, and consumption habits, including what clothes they could wear. *The Book of Guanzi* in ancient China discussed the importance of clothing in maintaining the social structure. The purpose was stated by the scholar-official Jia Yi (200-168 BCE), "a glance at the clothing would tell noble from inferior, while a glance at the pattern will convey the hierarchy and authority." This clothing served as an outward symbol of social status within this rigidly defined system.

To protect social stability, then, Chinese emperors issued laws regulating clothing, called sumptuary laws. During the Ming Dynasty, the government issued about 119 sumptuary laws - far more than those issued during previous dynasties. The first Ming emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, believed that the previous Mongol-run Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) had collapsed because its leaders had failed to distinguish nobles from their social inferiors.



**Ming Emperor  
Zhu Yuanzhang**





The new sumptuary laws were so detailed that they regulated almost every specific detail, from one's hat down to one's shoes. The material used for the officials' costume was fine silk, from the silk robes to the red silk tassel on the official hat. Peasants were permitted to wear thin, tough silk, gauze, and cotton cloth, but not more delicate and precious silk or other brightly-colored fabrics. Merchants faced the strictest sumptuary laws; merchant families and families who had even one member involved in commercial activities were banned from wearing any silk. Regulations usually came with severe punishments. Violations by commoners could be punished with 50 lashes, while scholar-officials would be punished with 100 lashes and dismissed from their position. In addition, even the artisans who made the clothes, would be punished with 50 lashes for wearing closed outside of their rank, unless they received express permission from the government beforehand.

***Portrait of Ming official in everyday court dress***

The government also issued regulations on the use of specific clothing designs. Different patterns were used to mark official ranks, with certain designs restricted to the imperial family and high-level officials. To promote frugality, the government also banned intricate designs. As the scholar-official Tian Yiheng recorded in the year 1570, the court prohibited private weavers from making certain designs, including fabric with patterns of cranes flying through clouds or women's dresses with floral patterned long sleeves.

The government also regulated what colors of clothes people could wear. Bright yellow was restricted for use by the emperor and empress. Ordinary people were not allowed to use red in their weddings until after the end of the Ming Dynasty. Women were only allowed to use pale colors such as pink and green. One early Ming anecdote reveals how one could be punished even for making a drawing of people wearing clothes that violated these sumptuary regulations. Painter Dai Jin (1388-1462) once used red to paint the only figure in his landscape painting, for a nice contrast with the ink wash. Although scholar-officials privately hailed the technique as a wonderful aesthetic, the emperor was not pleased due to the hierarchical meaning carried by the color red. Dai was, therefore, sequestered in the capital.



***Ming-era woman in semi-formal wear***

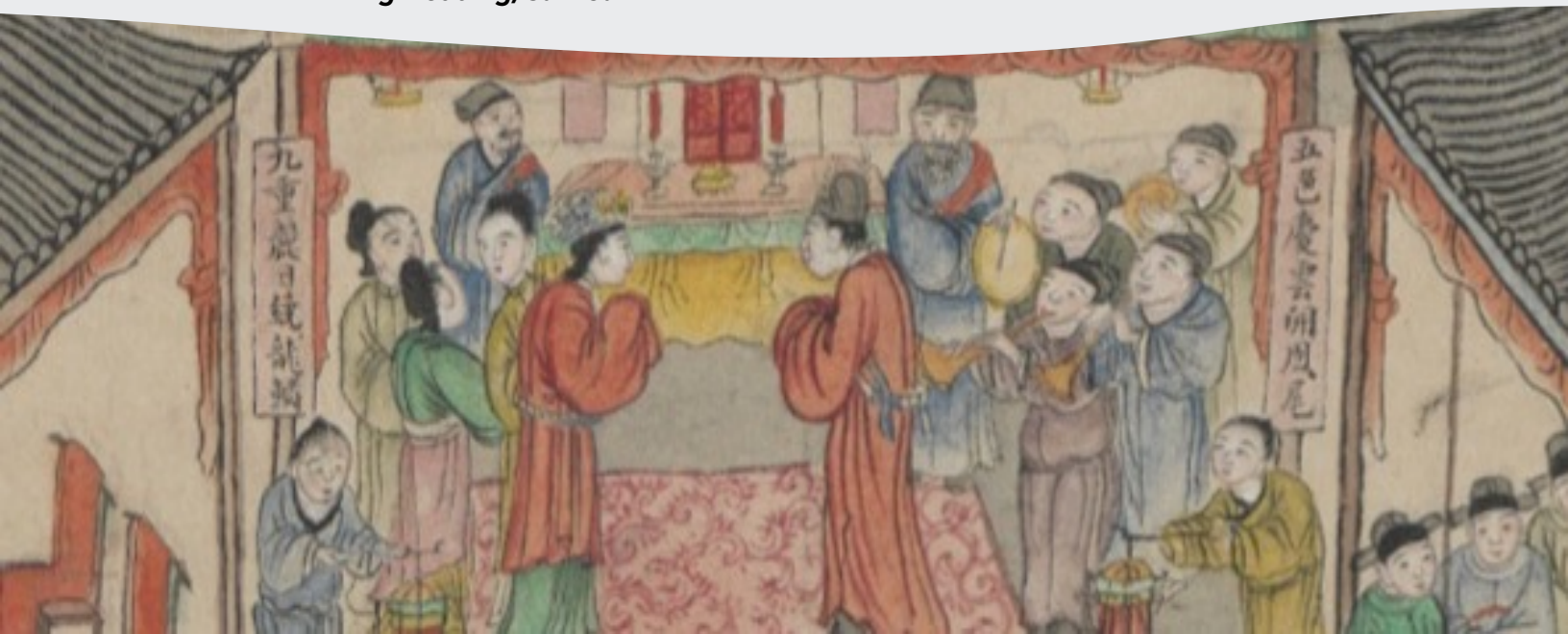
***Ming Dynasty portrait of Civil  
Servant Jiang Shunfu***

Despite the Ming government's restrictions, increasing urbanization from the sixteenth century increased the demand for luxury clothing. Wealthy merchants were especially eager to wear silk garments not permitted to them. In the early seventeenth century, the scholar Gu Qiyuan (1565-1628) commented that fashion trends in the eastern city of Suzhou had once changed every ten years; but in his time, fashions shifted every two or three years.



Seventeenth-century Chinese scholars criticized the popularity of these new expensive fashions as a form of moral corruption and an unwelcome challenge to the social hierarchy. In a well-circulated scathing seventeenth-century fiction, one scholar stated, "As of today, all people wore dark damask [a decorative woven fabric] and silk gauze, embroidered shoes, and cloudy footwear, without discerning their social status, fortune, seniority, or gender. ...How could these things not anger Heaven and Earth and exasperate ghosts and spirits? I am afraid that not only our ethos is being destroyed, but also that Heaven is to send down disasters!" The author thus applied Confucian teachings about proper clothing to morality and suggested that violations of sumptuary laws threatened the health of the entire society. Many Confucian scholars felt that luxury clothing undermined the distinctions between social classifications, challenged proper gender roles, and threatened family hierarchies. The blurring of such distinctions, in this view, now only threatened social stability, but potentially threatened the dynasty itself.

***Ming wedding, Suzhou***







**Ming-era silk clothing**

The spread of fashion among servants elicited the most concern, since critics feared that servants' extravagant wearing of silk would damage the social hierarchy and would embarrass those scholars could not afford such dress. As a late Ming scholar commented, "nowadays, the very servant girls dress in silk gauze, and the singsong girls look down on brocaded silks and embroidered gowns." Critics also warned that wearing delicate silk fabrics would hinder the servants' ability to perform their work.

In the late Ming era, the wearing of brightly colored clothing also became popular among non-nobles. It became fashionable among Chinese merchants to wear brightly colored luxury silk textiles to show off their wealth and status. In the county of Taining, in Fujian Province, non-noble people from wealthy families loved to wear red or purple with long sleeves and wide belt. People in the lower social levels, such as servant girls, demonstrated a much higher preference for red. The Ming-era literary work *Jin ping mei* (*Golden Vase Plum*) portraying city life of the era included a detailed description of women's fashion. The protagonist in the story, Ximen Qing, has many concubines; all were obsessed with red clothing, which was associated with being the wife of a government official. One even dreamed that another concubine arrived seeking to steal her red clothes from her.

Heightened demand for bright colors also led to a diversification of available shades of red and other bright colors. Wearing such clothes were acts of conspicuous consumption; they allowed the wearer to declare their elevated social status, to show off wealth, or to align themselves with current fashions.

Certain cities and regions became associated with specific kinds of fashionable clothing that were produced here. In addition, wearing clothing from a far-away locale became a mark of distinction. Wearing foreign fabrics that were expensive and difficult to acquire symbolized one's personal connections and wealth. This design for rare foreign objects also encouraged the development of ever more expansive global trade networks.



**Depiction of fashionable women in *Jin ping mei*** 6

In order to preserve their social distinction, elites frequently asked the Ming government to strengthen sumptuary laws. One scholar, while commenting on the excessive wearing of silk, complained, "the violations are so excessive that it is ridiculous. How could this be fixed if the government does not emphasize the prohibitions of the code?" Another compiler of local gazetteers also pointed out that those who govern should educate the people, and that enforcing these standards of who can wear what clothes should be a priority. Some scholars even proposed appointing officials to hold clothing inspections, developing a system in which neighbors spied on neighbors, or adopting harsh punishments for violations.

**Wen Zhengming**



However, such criticism of extravagant silk fashions slowly declined starting in the late 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century, because people got used to the changes, but also because they came to welcome the expanding commercial economy that inspired such fashions. A well-known scholar-official and painter, Wen Zhengming (1470-1559), for example, celebrated the value of commercial activities when a textile merchant named Shi Han hired him to write funerary eulogies for members of Shi's family.

He wrote, "[Shi's] father raised the family through hemp and silk, it became even wealthier with him, and the business became more flourishing. Their caps and belts, robes, and shoes covered the empire, and they were praised whenever patterned weaves were mentioned." Expressions such as this celebrated the silk trade for supporting Shi's family. Others celebrated the new industry for making valuable contributions to the state and the economy. Lu Ji (1515-1552), a governmental official from Songjiang, in Zhejiang Province, even argued that luxury should be viewed in a positive light. He contended that luxury could be good for overall economy, especially benefiting craftsman and ordinary people.



***Prosperous Suzhou, by Xu Yang, 1759***





**New Spain**

## New Spain

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Pacific Ocean parallel developments were unfolding. Visitors to seventeenth-century New Spain were impressed by the varieties of clothing worn by people of different ethnic groups. Thomas Gage, an English visitor to Mexico City in 1648, explained that most of the clothes that he saw were made with colored silks. He wrote, "both men and women are excessive in their apparel, using more silks than [woolen] stuff and cloth." Gage also described Black and mulatto (people of mixed African and European ancestry) women wearing skirts and headcloths of silk along with "sleeves of Holland or fine China linen wrought with colored silks." Such fashionable styles represented New Spain's connection to both the trans-Pacific and the trans-Atlantic trade routes. European and Asian styles were both available and highly regarded in the Spanish Americas. Meanwhile, people in New Spain regarded silks from Spain and the ones produced locally in Oaxaca as inferior.

Wearing Asian and European silks represented an individual's demand for luxury. But they also represent a general societal value for an integrated global market. In the Americas, they displayed desire among colonists for greater independence from Spain. After all, the trans-Pacific silk trade with China generated wealth in New Spain, separate from their dependence on Spain. It allowed merchants there an alternative to Spanish markets and thus increased independence from Spanish oversight in that way as well. Wearing clothing imported from Asia and elsewhere also symbolically linked colonists in New Spain to trade networks tying them to Asia. Finally, their ability to pay hefty taxes to the Spanish government expressed their loyalty to the king, but it also ensured that they had the king's ear in setting policies that might affect them. Thus, their ability to raise large amounts of money from the silk trade not only gave them a measure of autonomy from Spain, but also gave them influence at the court to support their own interests.



**Doña María de la Luz Padilla y Gómez de Cervantes, by Miguel Cabrera, c 1760**



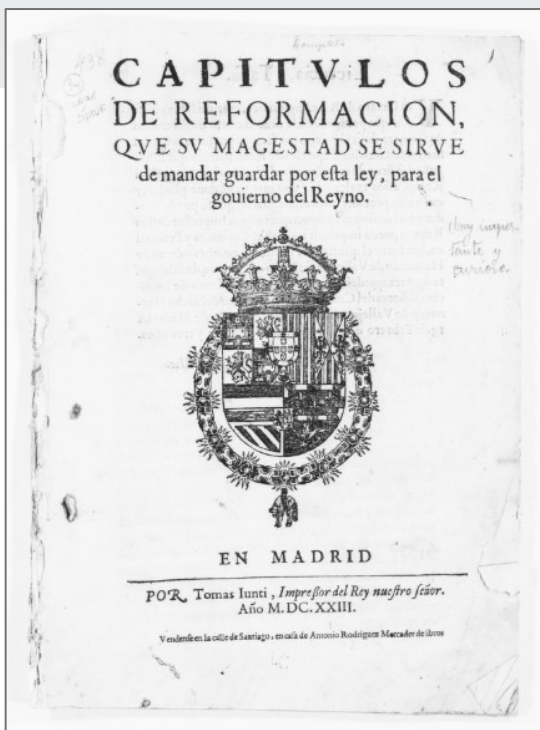
As in Ming China, New Spain's government also adopted sumptuary laws. Because of the complex blends of indigenous, European, and African cultures in the Spanish Americas, the government adopted even more complicated rules, however. Of course, indigenous peoples had rules about clothing centuries before the Spanish arrived. In the large, urbanized Aztec and Incan Empires, clothes symbolized an individual's age, occupation, and social status. After the Spanish conquests of the sixteenth century, viceroys added their own regulations to these preexisting expectations for clothing.

The Spanish were especially concerned to use such rules to maintain what they viewed as the "purity of blood" (*limpieza de sangre*) and social superiority of the Spanish. While Spain's government had long issued sumptuary rules domestically, such rules were particularly important in New Spain, because the high degree of social mobility in the colony made Spanish elites nervous. Those born in Spain – at the top of the social hierarchy – differentiated themselves from the *los crillos* ("the creoles"), as they called people of Spanish ancestry born in the Americas. Meanwhile, *los crillos* used such laws to elevate their social status and differentiate themselves from those with indigenous or African ancestry, or the growing population of people of mixed heritage. Such laws also helped Catholics represent their higher social status as compared to Jewish and Muslim residents of New Spain.



**King Philip II of Spain**

In response to rising popularity of silks, the Spanish king, Philip II, issued sumptuary laws eight times between 1563 and 1594. His son, Philip III, published another four laws. His grandson, Philip IV, also issued a decree in 1623 prohibiting the use of gold and silver for decorations on silk products. The laws initially targeted people of African heritage, who were banned from wearing luxury items such as silk. Later, the laws targeted indigenous peoples and people of mixed heritage as well. Silk workers who violated these laws by making extravagant clothes for customers who were banned from wearing them could also be banished from the colony. In such cases, the excessive clothing would be confiscated and donated to a church or other public institution.



**Royal Order decreeing the protocol, manners, and wardrobe in the Kingdom of Spain, 1623**



**Countess of Montebianco and Montemar, c 1765-1770**

While these sumptuary laws seemed rather rigid, there was some flexibility in their implementation. For instance, a 1563 law code people targeted by such restrictions to wear the forbidden clothing for a certain amount of time if the clothes had been made before the rules were issued. Women were given a longer grace period than men because women's clothing was more expensive. Similarly, in response to a petition from indigenous peoples in Quito, King Philip II permitted *los Indios* to dress in fancy clothes for special occasions. This command not only reflected increasing requests to wear silk from local indigenous communities, but also demonstrates the government's flexibility in enforcing its own sumptuary laws. Issuing such exceptions to such laws helped government officials deal with the uncomfortable fact that they could not uniformly enforce the laws, while stressing the rulers' authority to regulate clothing in the first place.

In the eighteenth century, Spanish legal codes were supplemented by so-called *casta* paintings. "*Casta*" is a Spanish word meaning "race," "kind," or "lineage". *Casta* paintings used labels and visual details such as skin tones, dress, and occupations to represent idealized ethnic, racial, generational, and socioeconomic categories of people. Elites commissioned such paintings in response to an anxiety about the breakdown of a clear socio-racial hierarchy in colonial society. While in reality, racial and ethnic mixing in New Spain was pretty fluid, *Casta* paintings presented imaginary people of different categories within an idealized hierarchical society in ways that reinforced those imagined social hierarchies. *Casta* paintings were presented most commonly in a series of sixteen individual canvases or a single canvas divided into sixteen compartments. The series usually depicted a man, woman, and child, arranged according to a hierarchy of race and status. The paintings were usually numbered and the racial mixtures identified in inscriptions. Spanish men were often portrayed as men of leisure or as professionals, Blacks and people of mixed African and European ancestry were presented as coachmen, while "Indians" often appeared as food vendors.

**Detail from *casta* painting, 18<sup>th</sup> c**





These paintings show scenes of prosperity and domesticity. They also satisfied European demands for images they believed were exotic as well as the growing interest in the natural world. Casta paintings were primarily made in New Spain for high-ranking colonial bureaucrats, military officials, and clergy. When their service in the colony was complete, these men took their casta paintings with them back to Spain.



***"Mulatto and Mestiza, produce Mulatto," by Juan Rodríguez Juárez, c 1715***

Yet even casta paintings did not always match the idealized forms that they proposed to represent. For example, the painting *From Spaniard and Mulatta, Morisca*, depicts the distinctive style of clothing that developed in response to the sumptuary laws. The painting's title identifies the figures in the painting as a Spanish father, a mother of mixed Spanish and African descent, and their daughter. The mother and daughter both wear blouses typically worn by Afro-Mexicans. The clothes are made from luxurious fabrics, silver and gold brooches, and colorful ribbons. The floral pattern of the mother's skirt resembles Asian patterns. While the title of the painting defines clear social category - or casta - for each person in the painting, the clothing styles did not follow governmental rules for what people of these social categories were allowed to wear. The fashionable clothing demonstrated a mixed style with the elements supposedly belonged to different social groups. In such a case, the person who commissioned the painting may have wanted to represent his wealth as much as the idealized forms.



***Chronicle of the Province of the Holy Gospel of Mexico, 1689***

Similar to China, some who were happier to embrace luxury clothing. In 1698, in his *Chronica de la Provincia del Santo Evangelio de México* (*Chronicle of the Province of the Holy Gospel of Mexico*), Agustín de Vetancurt (1620-1700) even celebrated the fashion of wearing expensive silks in Mexico City as a positive sign of economic prosperity, not a threat to social hierarchies.

Complaints about the wearing of fancy silks were also inspired by fears about the economic dangers of purchasing imported goods. In the eighteenth century, the Spanish botanist Juan de Cuéllar commented that the illegal import of textiles by traders in the Philippines cut into the revenues of the Spanish empire. In this case, he did not discuss the wearing of fine textiles out of concern to categorize people, but to protect Spain's mercantilist policies.





**Scene of commercial Suzhou,  
by Xu Yang, 1759**

## Conclusion

While China and New Spain were very different politically, culturally, and economically in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, in term of the silk industry they witnessed several similar social developments. First, increasing numbers of ordinary people were able to purchase textiles that previously had been restricted to them. They dressed up because they wanted to be seen as having good taste, especially if they had more wealth than expected for someone with their position in the social hierarchy. That is, people with new wealth were eager to raise their status by dressing like people previous above them in the pecking order.

Thus, on both sides of the Pacific Ocean, the growing desire for silk not only reflected changes in social hierarchies, but further explicitly challenged those social hierarchies. In response, governments adopted sumptuary laws regulating such excessive consumption. In New Spain, such laws focused on protecting racial distinctions that were critical to Spanish colonialism. In China, the laws aimed to pretext the status of government officials and scholars. But both governments proved unable to protect those hierarchies such legislation.

Can you think of comparable situations in terms of fashion in your own life, perhaps?



**18<sup>th</sup> Century Casta Painting  
depicting 16 groupings**



# Further Reading

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