

Primary Sources

On Fashion and Sumptuary Law in China

Introduction

Below is a series of texts and images from Ming China giving us a sense of the changing fashions in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as well as responses by governmental officials to those trends.

As you read, consider the following questions:

- How did Confucian values discussed in earlier lessons shape different people's attitudes toward silk fashions?
- According to contemporaries, why did people violate sumptuary laws?
- What did critics fear might be the consequences of wearing these new fashions?
- What do images tell us about the symbolic value of clothing in Ming China?

When you are reading, also consider ways in which changing demand for goods might relate to the supply-side factors shaping these markets that we discussed in Lesson 2.

Confucian Teachings on Clothing in Ancient China

*This excerpt is from a book titled *Guanzi*, an encyclopedic compilation of seventy essays mostly dealing with how to run a government and manage an economy. Readers once attributed the *Guanzi* to an ancient Chinese philosopher and minister of state named Guan Zhong (c.720-645 B.C.), but scholars now recognize that the writings were written from the 5th to the 1st century B.C. by a variety of authors, whose identities remain unknown to us. The book was compiled in its present form in about 26 B.C. by a Han dynasty scholar named Liu Xiang. It articulated Confucian values, as well as ideas associated with the Chinese political philosophy called Legalism and ancient Chinese understandings of the Tao.*

*Transcribed by Xiaolin Duan from Allyn Rickett, *Guanzi: Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China: A Study and Translation* (Boston: Cheng & Tsui, 2001), 109-10.*

“Let clothing be regulated according to gradations in rank.... In life, let there be distinctions in regard to carriages and official caps, clothing and positions, stipends and salaries, and fields and dwellings.... Let no one, even if worthy and honored, dare wear clothing does not befit his rank. Let no one, even if coming from a rich family and possessing extensive property, dare spend wealth that exceeds his salary.”

A Scholar Reflects on Chinese Sumptuary Laws

Zhang Han (1511–1593), also sometimes called Ziwen or Yuanzhou, was a scholar-official in Ming China who came from a textile-making family in Hangzhou, in Zhejiang Province, on China's eastern coast. Zhang was deeply knowledgeable about trade of the era. He completed his Songchuang mengyu (Dream Essays at the Pine Window), a collection of essays, in the last year of his life, though some of the writings come from much earlier. In this passage from the seventh section (juan) of the book, titled Songchuang mengyu (Account of the Hundred Crafts), he commented on the success of the government's regulation of clothing among China's artisans.

Transcribed by Xiaolin Duan from Craig Clunas, Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in early Modern China (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 153–54.

“The dynasty has clear regulations for the dress and ornaments of women from official families... As times changed and customs became more lavish, people all set their resolve on venerating riches and excesses and, as they no longer knew there were explicit prohibitions, instead went about trampling on them... Nowadays men dress in brocaded and embroidered silks, and women ornament themselves with gold and pearls, in a case of boundless extravagance which flouts the regulations of the state.”

A Scholar Discusses the Fashions of Ming China

Gu Qiyuan (1565–1628) was a scholar and commissioner of education in Nanjing – the capital of Nanjing Province – from 1610 to 1613. He wrote his Kezuo zhuiyu (Superfluous Remarks made at the Parlor) as a commentary on consumption in seventeenth-century China, especially among women. In this passage, he commented of the speed of changes in fashion.

Translated by Xiaolin Duan from Gu Qiyuan, Kezuo zhuiyu (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987) 9.21a-b.

“As for women’s clothing in Nanjing, thirty years before, they changed only once every ten years. Recently, not two or three years passed before some new styles appear. The size and level of the bun, the width and length of the clothes sleeves, the pattern of the flower ornament, the color of the makeup, the decoration for the hair and the craftsmanship of the shoes, all change.... For extravagant clothes and housing, the dynasty has very clear regulations. The Ming law is the most complete and strict. But nowadays, the legal codes got relaxed, sometimes the scholars discussed and strived to clarify, but people don’t care about it and laugh at [these scholars]; this is very sad.”

A Gazetteer Records the Criteria for Silk Textiles

Tongzhou zhi was a local gazetteer from the county of Tongzhou, near Beijing. This edition from the late sixteenth century recorded the increasingly negative views of ordinary people toward locally-produced silk textiles. They preferred clothing from the fashion centers of the county of Wu and the city of Suzhou, in the Zhejiang Province in the Lower Yangtze River region. The “Song brocade” mentioned here is a multicolored silk with a raised patterning first produced during the Song Dynasty (960-1279) – hence the name – but which became popular in the Ming Dynasty. Song brocades, mostly produced in Suzhou, had gained the prestige of the “crown brocade of China” for their superb colors, delicate patterns, and soft but durable texture. The “fabrics woven with camel wool” mentioned above were textiles imported from abroad. Their quality did come from their delicate texture, but from their foreign origin.

Translated by Xiaolin Duan from Shen Mingsheng, Chen Dake, and Gu Yangqian, ed., *Tongzhou zhi* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji shudian yingyin, 1981), 2.47b.

“Now the youth from our town consider silk gauze [*luo*] and patterned fabrics [*qi*] worth nothing, seeking the expensive and elegant Wu silk and Song brocade, cloud patterned thin satin, and fabrics woven with camel wool imported from far away to dress themselves. The trousers and socks are all in pure colors. As for the making of clothes, long dresses, wide collars, wide belts, and detailed ribbons, these have changed very rapidly, and people call this the “style of the time.” ... Therefore, when someone participates in a gathering without wearing patterned and colorful clothes, other folks would laugh at him discreetly and do not let him take a preferred seat. The previously worn sheep’s-intestine coarse grass linen and undyed cloth are no longer sold on market, as no one wears them. The uneducated people in lower status also wear scholar’s scarf and do not know that is prohibited. The actors, courtesans, clergies, peddlers and carriers, even wear cloud-headed shoes—and others would not find it strange.”

Fashion in a Seventeenth-Century Chinese Novel

Xi zhou sheng (Scholar of the Western Zhou) is the pseudonym of a writer whose novel *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* (Marriage as Retribution, Awakening the World) portrays how ideal Confucian families function and offers satirical commentary on Chinese society. Some scholars believe that *Xi zhou sheng* was Ding Yaokang (1599–1669), but others argue that it was really Pu Songling (1640–1715). The fictional story describes a series of women from a variety of social ranks. This passage offers a cutting critique of contemporary fashions.

Translation adapted by Xiaolin Duan from one in Xiaoyi Liu, “Clothing, Food and Travel: Ming Material Culture as Reflected in *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan*,” (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Arizona, 2010), 108. The original is in *Xi zhou sheng, Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1993), 26.197–8.

“The youth wear hoods and caps of extreme eccentricity and ambiguity. Merely a teenager, he puts on a jade-blue crepe long cloudy headband with goldthread embroidery, a piece of light-yellow robe, and a pair of bright-red satin “snout shoes.” Sometime he wears a Korean-paper-sarceneted,* red Hangzhou silk robe, the length of which only reaches to his knees, yet the two wide sleeves to his feet. Of what kind of vulgar speeches he utters I don’t know; disregarding the seniority differentiations of father, elder brother, uncle, grandfather, he greets people in one gesture, that is, he snaps his thumb and middle finger in front of the person’s face, and yells: ‘Ah! My son’s brother!’ Sadly, this greeting has become prevalent... When the ethos of unsophisticated ancients was pervasive, even a minister’s chamberlain dared not to wear a piece of cloth gown. Yet as of today, all people wore dark damask and silk gauze, embroidered shoes, and cloudy footwear, without discerning their social status, fortune, seniority, or gender. ...I withhold my resentment here from noting down everything on paper, leaving my readers a room to mobilize their imaginations...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!”

* That is, adored with sarsenet, a fine silk fabric.

A Discussion about Luxury by Lu Ji

Lu Ji (1515–1552) was scholar who had failed the examinations necessary to get him a career as a civil servant. Still, he became prolific and well-regarded author in Ming China, who wrote quite a lot about economics. Lu Ji sometimes challenged conventional Confucian or mainstream thinking of this day. In this work Jianjia tang zazhu zhaichao (The Excerpt of Janjia Tang), he argued in favor of conspicuous consumption.

Translation by Xiaolin Duan from Lu Ji, Jianjia tang zazhu zhaichao, Zhongguo yeshi jicheng (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 1993), 37.3a.

“As for the officials who want to prohibit luxuries, they believe that as long as the wealth is restricted then commoners could become rich... I have never seen how luxuries could result in the poverty of the country. ...For rulers who govern the entire nation, should they prefer to have individual person or household to become rich, or to have the entire nation become rich? Every time I examine the situation in our country, wherever the lifestyle is luxury, commoners have an easy living; wherever the lifestyle is frugal, the commoners had a hard life. Why? because of the overall economic situation. Nowadays, the majority of revenue comes from the region of Wu and Yue* and the luxury life in this region is the most prominent in Suzhou and Hangzhou. There are numerous people who don’t till but eat good food, and people who don’t weave but wear patterned silk, this is because people love pursuing luxury and prefer commercial activities... those who prefer wearing silk and brocade, the weavers could benefit from their consumption... Therefore, the luxury lifestyle could make ordinary people’s life easier...How could we prohibit luxury without considering this? Alas, this can only be told to people with wisdom.”

* Two regions in Zhejiang Province.

Painting of Zhu Yuanzhang

Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398) was the first emperor of the Ming dynasty. This painting of him on silk comes from the 14th century. The dragon pattern on his shirt was reserved exclusively for the emperor. Note also the color of his clothing.

National Palace Museum, Taipei. Accessed at, <https://theme.npm.edu.tw/>



Portrait of Yang Hong

Yang Hong (1381-1451) was a Ming army commander. This painting on silk of him was made near the end of his life. Today, it rests at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art, in Washington, DC. In it, he is wearing a ceremonial military helmet and clothing that match his social and governmental ranks.

Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art,
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Accessed at,
<https://asia.si.edu/object/S1991.77/>



Portrait of Jiang Shunfu

Jiang Shunfu (1453–1504) was a scholar-official during the Ming Dynasty. This image shows clothing demonstrating his official rank in the Chinese government. Government officials in Ming China were ranked, depending on how they performed on a set of exams. Officials in rank 1 to 4 wore red official robes, ranks 5 to 7 wore blue, rank 8 to 9 wore green. It's hard to see here, but Jiang's robe is blue. The pattern on the front of the robe, called "insignia badges (buzi)," depicted animals that represented specific ranks. In this case, the two cranes distinguish him as the one of the highest civic officials in the government.

Scanned from *Mingqing renwuxiaoxiang huaxuan* (Nanjing: Nanjing Bowuguan, 1979), pl. 16. Accessed via Wikimedia Commons.



Late 17th-Early-18th Century Rank Badge

During the Ming Dynasty, scholar-officials wore robes with badges indicating their civil service rank. This one measures 34.3 x 31.1 cm (13.5" x 12.25"). While military officials had badges with four-legged mammals, the badges of civil officials include images of birds. This rank badge comes from the Qing Dynasty, when the use of badges largely continued, with some design changes until the Xinhai Revolution (1911) put an end to imperial rule in China. The crane represented here symbolized the highest-ranking civil official in both Ming and Qing China. See other examples of rank badges in the exhibit at [The Artful Fabric of Collecting](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/62893) or at the [University of Michigan](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/62893).

Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accessed at, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/62893>



Painting Folio of Xu Xianqing's Official Resume

Xu Xianqing (1537-1602) was a scholar-official in the Ming dynasty from Suzhou, in Zhejiang Province, who became head of the Imperial Academy, the central institution of higher learning for the Chinese empire, in 1587, and later Vice-Minister of Rites and Vice-Minister of Personnel. In 1588 he commissioned a set of twenty-six paintings on silk cloth that depicted his entire working career, titled *Xu Xianqing huanji tu* (Painting Folio of Xu Xianqing's Official Resume). This painting is the twelfth of the set, which depicts scholar-officials in 1578 the court of the emperor's palace in Beijing.

Yu Ren & Wu Yue, *Xu Xianqing huanji tu*. Palace Museum (Beijing). Accessed via Wikimedia Commons.



Scenery from Nanjing

During the Ming Dynasty, the city of Nanjing was named as a second southern capital of the Chinese Empire, alongside the main northern capital in Beijing. Nanjing became a commercial center, as depicted here from a painting on silk from the late Ming period during the third lunar month, sometimes attributed to an artist known as Qiu Ying (1494-1552), titled *Nandu fanhui tu* (A Scroll of Scenery from the Prosperous Southern Capital). At the center of the painting is a raised stage with spectators standing on three sides watching an actor performing Kunqu, an ancient form of Chinese opera. It also depicts 109 advertising posters, including those reading "Fur from the two ports in the northwest," "Fruit and dessert from the North and the South," "Beijing-style shoe shop," "Store for seafood from Fujian and Canton," and "Li Family's Groceries from Sichuan and Canton." Below is an overview the entire painting. The following pages include ten close-up images.

Nandu fanhui tu, National Museum, Beijing. 44×350 cm. Accessed at <https://new.qq.com/omn/20190925/20190925A0BO8M00.html>, accessed February 16, 2022.



Figure 1:

*The Commercial Sector (Including
Advertisements for
Clothing and Shoe
Shops)*



Figure 2:

*The Commercial
Sector*



Figure 3:

The Commercial Sector



Figure 4:

The Commercial
Sector



Figure 5:

The Commoner's
Shops



Figure 6:

A Suburban Area



Figure 7:

*Audiences for the
Show*



Figure 8:

The Performance



Figure 9:

Man Wearing Glasses
(Imported from
Europe)

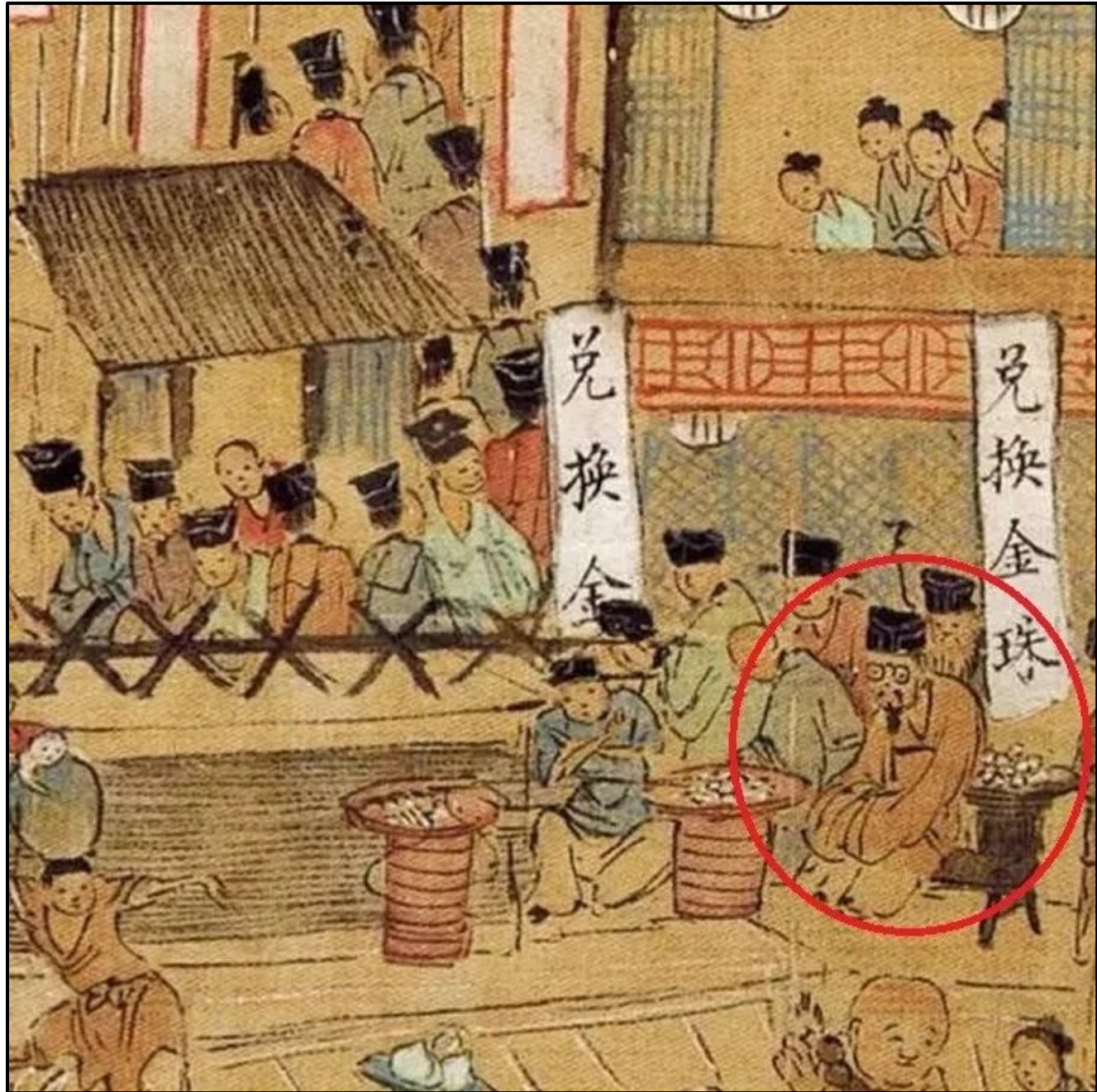


Figure 10:

The Imperial Palace

