

Book Reviews

Empire of Style: Silk and Fashion in Tang China. By BuYun Chen. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2019. Pp. xiv + 257. \$70.00.

BuYun Chen has written a brilliantly researched and beautifully illustrated history of fashion during the Tang dynasty. The author is a multitalented scholar capable of analysing an array of source types extending beyond the repertoire of most Tang historians. In addition to the conventional transmitted Tang historical, geographical, and legal texts, she analyses Tang poetry and art historical essays, contemporary documents discovered in Turfan and Dunhuang over the past century, and excavated tomb murals, figurines, and textiles. *Empire of Style* is beautiful because it is printed on glossy paper with eighty-four mainly colour images that impressively illustrate the author's arguments about changes in Tang fashion, textile design, and technology. Her wide array of sources and attention to detail allows her to examine the topic as comprehensively as possible.

In the Introduction, Chen argues that fashion is a phenomenon that pre-dates modern European capitalism or early modern societies with highly commercialized economies, such as Ming China (1368–1644) and Tokugawa Japan (1603–1868), associated with “accelerated production and consumption of commodities . . . [and] synonymous with change” (p. 5). Instead, she argues that the Tang empire presents a case study of a premodern, non-Western society where the concept of fashion held meaning “for the maker, wearer, viewer, and chronicler” (p. 6). In the case of the Tang, she identifies two “motors” of innovation in fashion. One was a textile industry that was fueled by imperial expansion of frontiers and the court's demand for silk taxes and tribute (p. 9). The other was what the author calls “aesthetic play” by which “sensual desires” were expressed in new forms of adornment (pp. 9–10). Even though only elites could afford the exotic fabrics needed to engage in “aesthetic play” in clothing, Chen argues that “fashion was central to the lives of all Tang subjects because the empire had placed cloth at the center of the structure of economic and moral values” (p. 12). Fashion depended on textiles, which were produced and woven by rural farming families and urban weaving specialists, taxed and regulated by the government, used as money, and desired in exotic forms by stylish elites. Gender plays an important role because women were primarily responsible for rural weaving and were perceived as the prime purveyors of fashionable trends that upset mainly male moralists (p. 10).

After the Introduction, the book is divided into two parts that are subdivided into a total of five chapters with an appended Epilogue and Appendix. Part One, “Traces,” lays the groundwork for understanding the impact of Tang imperial policies on fashion. Chapter 1, “History: Cloth and the Logics of Cosmopolitan Empire,” based mainly on research on secondary sources, provides a background for understanding Chen’s argument about the two “motors” of fashion trends. Tang expansion in the first half of the dynasty accelerated the “circulation of things and people” and “spurred the desire for sensory pleasures” (p. 22). This had an impact on textile production because the government collected taxes from farmers partly in cloth, which was woven from silk or hemp, depending on the type of local production. Since textiles were relatively light compared to the other tax media of grain and bronze coins, the government transported tax cloth to the periphery of the empire to pay the costs of administration. This, in turn, led to aesthetic and technical exchanges between centre and periphery that Chen investigates in detail subsequently in Chapters 3 and 4. The Tang capital of Chang’an was not only the locus of financial administration, but also the cosmopolitan and trendsetting centre of the second motor of fashion, “aesthetic play.” There “the Tang fashion system,” in which “[d]isplay and spectacle were central to . . . experience” (p. 34), reached its peak during the reign of Xuanzong 玄宗 (712–756). A turning point came in the penultimate year of his rule when the An Lushan 安祿山 rebellion (755–762) broke out and subsequently discredited Xuanzong’s extravagance in the eyes of the literati.

Chapter 2, “Discourse: Fashion and Sumptuary Regulation,” examines Tang central government documents with information on sumptuary regulations governing clothing styles. Chen argues that the power of premodern states to enforce a static hierarchy of clothing styles has been exaggerated, particularly by scholars who believe that fashion is the product of a modern capitalist economy. The author describes the administrative laws regulating the clothing of nobility and government officials that were implemented at the start of the dynasty. The chapter also reviews the periodic attempts of emperors to reinvigorate sumptuary regulations, which the author interprets as evidence that the government was unsuccessful in controlling new fashions. For example, Emperor Daizong 代宗 (r. 762–779) “issued an edict forbidding the weaving of opulent and novel patterns of silks” in 771 out of the belief that the fancy designs diverted farming families from weaving bolts of plain white tabby silk to provide tax payments (p. 67). The numerous designs that were specifically forbidden in the edict provide evidence of innovations in silk weaving technology in the previous half century. The author argues that the government failed to regulate styles and the increasing complexity of designs because of the continued personal extravagance of the emperors and palace women, innovations in weaving technology, and an expanding market economy after the An Lushan rebellion. Whether at court or in the provinces, the government proved unable to curb the

demand for new trends in adornment or prevent producers from developing innovative designs to meet the demand for new fashions.

Part Two, “Surfaces,” is the most crucial in presenting evidence for the existence of premodern fashion. The author’s main primary sources in Chapter 3, “Style: Fashioning the Tang Beauty,” are murals and figurines, discovered in Tang tombs, that detail changing Tang ideals of fashionable women. In addition, a key textual source, Zhang Yanyuan’s 張彥遠 *Record of Famous Painters of Successive Dynasties* (*Lidai minghua ji* 歷代名畫記) of 847 provides evidence that art is a reliable indicator of fashion trends because Zhang claims that artists have sought to faithfully reproduce the styles of their eras. Lavishly illustrated with thirty-four colour figures, the chapter makes a convincing case that the physique and clothing of stylish females, as well as their depictions in art, underwent changes from the seventh to the tenth century that were driven by fashion. The slender female in vogue in the seventh century was replaced by the voluptuous “Tang Beauty” by the early eighth century and remained in style through the tenth century. Although women were depicted wearing the same basic assemblages of skirts, short robes or jackets and shawls, these underwent changes in colours, patterns, and designs. For example, in the seventh century, female clothing had a trimmer fit and flat colours, but by the eighth century more billowy cuts and designs with stripes and then floral patterns began to clothe the plump female figures. Though the voluptuous body remained the standard of Tang female beauty through the tenth century, Chen argues that artistic representations depict “a broad range of visual styles” indicative of changing vogues in fashion (p. 115). Another famous trend across the seventh and eighth centuries was the propensity of elite females to cross-dress in male “barbarian dress” of caftan, belt, boots, and headwear that had been adopted from Inner Asia to facilitate horse riding. She argues that these changing styles in female clothing and art reflected the aesthetic play of women and the artists who depicted them.

In Chapter 4, “Design: Silk and the Logics of Fashion,” Chen’s exceptional versatility as a scholar becomes more apparent as she analyses the designs and weaves of excavated textiles. The author argues that Tang fashion placed more emphasis on patterns and weaves of silk fabrics than the shape of garments. While the fundamental garments changed relatively little in “sleeve widths, hemlines, and waistlines, the surface and form of silk textiles were subject to constant alterations through design” to allow elite women to differentiate themselves “from the monochrome mass” (p. 122). Therefore, it was silk weavers and designers who were the most important purveyors of “new styles” (*xinyang* 新樣) rather than tailors. The author’s argument yet again is lavishly defended with twenty illustrations, mainly of colour photographs of extant textile fragments. The chapter relates a history of silk textile production that adopted new designs and weaves from the periphery of the empire in the early Tang, then shifted southward after the An Lushan rebellion and grew even more

sophisticated in design as the result of the development of new loom technology in a growing market economy. The Appendix supplements this chapter with a detailed explanation of weaves and looms.

Finally, Chapter 5, “Desire: Men of Style and the Metrics of Fashion,” is the final display of Chen’s versatility as a scholar. She examines how male poets, particularly Bai Juyi 白居易 and Yuan Zhen 元稹, conceptualized fashion. Even though these poets criticized some “‘currents’ or ‘trends’ (*liuxing* 流行)” (p. 155) of dress as a source of moral corruption and political decay, they promoted new literary fashions that they described as “‘keeping up with the times’ (*rushi* 入時) and the state of being ‘of the age’ (*shishi* 時世)” (p. 157). Chen argues that, “literary practice came close to fashion practice—distinction was propelled by a desire for individual differentiation,” and the trendsetters attracted imitators (p. 159). Just as Xuanzong’s court had been the pacesetter in clothing and entertainment fashions in the first half of the eighth century, Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi’s literary works composed in the new “‘Yuanhe style’ (*Yuanhe ti* 元和體)” attracted many imitators in the early ninth century (p. 158). Yuan and Bai used their new style of poetry to “communicate social and political concerns to the emperor” (pp. 159–60).

The second half of the chapter investigates Bai Juyi’s critique of women’s predilection for fashionable styles. In his poetry, Bai reinvigorated the topoi of the “sumptuously attired court woman and her opposite, the unkempt, laboring woman weaver” (p. 162). For example, Bai’s poem “Adornment of the Times” (*Shishizhuang* 時世狀) criticizes the contemporary female hairstyle and make-up in the “barbarian” style as symbols of social and political degeneration after the An Lushan rebellion. In other poems, the desire of fashionable palace ladies for luxurious fabrics receives part of the blame for the poverty and misery of the weaving woman who works herself to exhaustion to satisfy the demands of the court for silks to clothe fine ladies and purchase horses to wage war. Chen’s conclusion is persuasive that Bai’s “criticism of fashion as wasteful and superficial only served as evidence of the continued relevance of fashion in the postrebellion Tang world” (p. 177).

Chapter 5 effectively serves as the conclusion to the book, but Chen appends a short epilogue seeking to justify fashion as a topic of historical study. She points out that the gendering of fashion as female has traditionally marginalized it as a research subject, but argues that fashion was also a concern of men, a rare mode of public expression open to women, and “a key form of metaphorical thinking about social structures, desire, gender, and the progress of time” (p. 181). Chen’s book clearly makes a persuasive case for fashion as a serious topic of study.

While Chen makes a strong argument that the Tang elite followed fashion, there is less support for her contention that “fashion was central to the lives of *all* Tang subjects” (p. 12, my italics). Most of the book’s evidence was left behind by the elite of North China in the form of their transmitted writings, and artwork and textiles

from their large underground tombs. Even though most farming families produced textiles, rural females typically wove cloth on simple looms in state-mandated sizes to pay tax levies. Surplus textiles, woven in the same fixed sizes, served as money with a standard value. Chen notes that the fancier fabrics were produced in imperial workshops and professional weaving households in the provinces using technically advanced looms that could create more complex weaves. Evidence of sophisticated designs in the provinces mainly derives from lists of textiles sent to the court as tribute. Although Xuanzong issued an edict in 732 permitting the payment of taxes in fancier weaves, silk included in transmitted Tang tax records remained plain undyed tabby that could be produced on the simple looms of farming families (see Chen's Table 4.2). Chen cites important Dunhuang documents of the Doulu Army 豆廬軍 dated to 745, which contain the best extant examples of the Tang government transporting and warehousing tax silks. Of the 14,678 silks inventoried in one document, the vast majority are plain weaves or silk floss. Only a total of 540 bolts (3.67%) are plain weaves dyed red or green. Evidently, most rural weaving women whose tabbies were shipped to the Doulu Army had produced plain white silks in standard sizes to meet the dictates of the tax collector rather than style. The surplus silks the farming families sold on the market presumably clothed "the monochrome mass" in the provinces rather than the tiny elite of fashionistas who could afford fancier designs. After the An Lushan rebellion, silk production shifted to the southern regions of the empire. Even though Chen interprets imperial edicts banning fancy silks as signs of a growing market for fashionable textiles, there seems to be little evidence available to document who was producing the elaborate weaves or how economic development of the south, particularly the growth of large estates, may have influenced the textile industry.

Another aspect of the thesis that requires greater refinement is the roles of the Tang Empire and aesthetic play as the two primary "motors" of change in fashion. Although Tang court tastes and outward military expansion undoubtedly accelerated artistic and technical exchanges with Eurasia, this was merely the continuation of earlier trends. Several examples given by the author of tastes for foreign goods and styles can be traced back centuries earlier. One example is the pearl roundel design, initially popularized in Sasanian Iran, which appears to have first become fashionable in North China under the Xianbei-ruled Northern Wei (386–534). Moreover, the earliest example of the innovative weft-based textile design, which shows the influence of West Asian weaves, was discovered at Turfan oasis and dates to *c.* 548 under the rule of the sinophone Gaochang 高昌 Kingdom (pp. 142–43). In this case, Silk Road interactions of weavers who immigrated to Turfan from China and Sogdiana, or elsewhere in West Asia, seem to have stimulated innovation during a period when Gaochang's kings delivered tribute of silks to Turkic suzerains. In another type of case, the Sui emperor Yangdi 煬帝 was inspired to imitate the court

styles of Sasanian Iran as a result of receiving diplomatic gifts of “marvelous *jin* [錦] robes woven with gilt thread.” His imitations allegedly surpassed the originals in beauty and quality because he employed a government official of Sogdian descent who was skilled in design (p. 139). Despite Yangdi’s reputation as a morally bad last emperor who frivolously neglected government, his desire to reproduce these designs likely was related to political concerns. As Matthew Canepa and I have demonstrated, competitive emulation and one-upmanship in court ritual and fashion were common elements of diplomatic interactions among the contemporary great powers, including the Turks, Sasanians, and Byzantines. Finally, later in time, Tang influence on fashion remained at Dunhuang in the form of paintings of the “Tang Beauty” exhibiting local style, while Dunhuang was under Tibetan rule in the period from 768 to 848 (pp. 112–15). In this case, Tang fashion influence remained at a location outside of the reach of the Tang government. The Tang court undoubtedly held enormous prestige in its heyday, but it was only one political centre participating in ongoing interactions involving Eurasian courts and diplomats, as well as migrating artisans, merchants, and monks, who collectively stimulated new fashion styles.

My final quibble is that two of the maps inaccurately depict the political and economic boundaries in the northeast and northwest of the Tang Empire. Map 1.2—showing the ten Tang Circuits in the early eighth century, each of which comprised prefectures with state-appointed officials—erroneously includes territory extending to the international borders of modern Manchuria and Xinjiang. The Tang only had indirect influence over part of this territory through vassal rulers who did not pay regular taxes and often changed allegiances. For example, the Khitan, the most significant group of people living in contemporary Manchuria, were a loose confederation of tribes that went back and forth between allegiances to the Tang and Turks in the early eighth century. Map 4.1 on regions producing silk for taxation inaccurately includes Manchuria and northern Xinjiang. These two regions mostly were unsuited to silk production because much of the terrain was forest, steppe, or desert.

These relatively minor shortcomings do not detract from BuYun Chen’s accomplishment. She has produced an important book that is a pathbreaking examination of premodern Chinese fashion and a model of interdisciplinary research. *Empire of Style* will capture the interest of a wide array of specialists in the premodern China field, particularly in the disciplines of history, art history, textile history, literature, and gender studies.

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