



East
Asian
History

NUMBER 25/26 · JUNE/DECEMBER 2003

Institute of Advanced Studies
Australian National University

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Printed by Goanna Print, Fyshwick, ACT



This is the combined twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth issue of *East Asian History*, printed in December 2004, in the series previously entitled *Papers on Far Eastern History*. An externally refereed journal, it is published twice a year

Contributions to The Editor, *East Asian History*
Division of Pacific and Asian History
Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies
Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200, Australia
Phone +61 2 6125 3140 Fax +61 2 6125 5525
Email marion.weeks@anu.edu.au

Subscription Enquiries to Subscriptions, *East Asian History*, at the above address, or to
marion.weeks@anu.edu.au

Annual Subscription Australia A\$50 (including GST) Overseas US\$45 (GST free) (for two issues)

ISSN 1036-6008

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Cover calligraphy Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿, Tang calligrapher and statesman

Cover illustration A memorial from the chief eunuch Bian Dekui — “The Legal and Social Status of Theatrical Performers in Beijing During the Qing” by Ye Xiaoqing, see p.81.

ILLUSIONS OF GRANDEUR: PERCEPTIONS OF STATUS AND WEALTH IN LATE-MING FEMALE CLOTHING AND ORNAMENTATION

史 Sarah Dauncey

In the small town of Qinghe 清河, Shandong 山東, the female protagonists of the late sixteenth-century novel *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅¹ prepare for the visit of a group of female acquaintances:

Wu Yueniang wore a scarlet satin *tongxiu*² gown depicting the “hundred animals face the *qilin*”³ in variegated brocade, with a gold belt inlaid with a variety of precious gems. On her head an ornamented chignon rose imposingly heaped with pearls and kingfisher feather ornaments; phoenix hairclasps were inserted on either side. From the embroidered ribbon across her chest was suspended a gold necklace strung with pearls; a pearl girdle pendant hung by her skirt. Wu Yueniang, Li Jiao'er, Meng Yulou, Pan Jinlian, Li Ping'er and Sun Xue'e, all dressed up to the nines like powdered jade carvings, went to the second door to welcome their guests.⁴

Such cinematic descriptions of clothing and ornamentation fill the pages of this novel notorious for its detailed depictions of the seedier and more colourful sides of sixteenth-century life. Although such cataloguing of dress and jewellery may seem unnecessarily repetitive to Western readers nowadays, this was a convention familiar to readers in late imperial China who were well accustomed to the use of costume as an identifier of status and character in most literary or theatrical contexts.⁵

The action of *Jin Ping Mei* is centered on the inner quarters of a merchant household and relates a tale of male and female attempts at social advancement.⁶ Wu Yueniang 吳月娘 is the principal wife of Ximen Qing 西門慶, a successful and ambitious merchant who has recently ‘acquired’ the position of

Many thanks to Don Starr, Daria Berg, Keith Pratt, Tim Wright, Beverley Hooper, Chloe Starr, Antonia Finanne and the anonymous reader for *East Asian History* for their invaluable suggestions and assistance during the research and preparation of this article.

All attempts have been made to contact publishers in regard to copyright.

¹ The title of this novel appears to be composed of characters taken from the names of the principal female characters—Pan Jinlian 潘金蓮, Li Ping'er 李瓶兒 and Pang Chunmei 龐春梅. A very literal translation would be “gold, vase, plum blossom.”

² This literally means a “through-sleeve” pattern. As *tongxiu* has no English equivalent, I have retained the romanisation of the style. See later for a more detailed discussion of this style.

³ A colourful mythical beast with the body of a deer, the tail of an ox, the hoofs of a horse and a single horn. See Figure 4.

⁴ *Jin Ping Mei cibhua* 金瓶梅詞話, by Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 蘭陵笑笑生 (reprint ed. 6 vols.; Hong Kong: Taiping Shuju, 1986), 43.11a–b (hereafter abbreviated *JPMCH*). Note that for Chinese primary sources, a full-stop separates the section/volume (*juan* 卷) or chapter (*bui* 回) number and the page number.

⁵ For examples of the significance of clothing in the late Qing 清 dynasty (1644–1911) context, see Paola Zamperini, “Clothes that matter: fashioning modernity in late Qing novels,” *Fashion Theory* 5.2 (2001): 195–214.

⁶ For extensive discussions on the novel and its content, see C. T. Hsia, *The classic Chinese novel: a critical introduction* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1968).

/1980), pp.165–202; Andrew H. Plaks, *The four masterworks of the Ming novel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp.55–180.

⁷ The period under discussion covers the reign periods Zhengde 正德 (1506–21) through to Wanli 萬曆 (1573–1620).

⁸ Merchants were classed as the lowest ranking of the commoners after scholars, farmers, and artisans, and were superior only to those classed as base, e.g. prostitutes. At the top of the system was the ruling stratum, comprising the imperial household, hereditary nobility and the majority of officialdom.

⁹ Craig Clunas, "Regulation of consumption and the institution of correct morality by the Ming state," in *Norms and the state in China*, ed. Chun-chieh Huang and Erik Zürcher (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), pp.39–49.

¹⁰ For discussions on economic expansion during this period, see Evelyn Rawski, "Ming society and the economy," *Ming Studies* 2 (1976): 12–19; Tanaka Masatoshi, "Rural handicraft in Jiangnan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries," in *State and society in China: Japanese perspectives on Ming–Qing social and economic history*, ed. Linda Grove and Christian Daniels (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1984), pp.79–100; Albert Feuerwerker, *Studies in the economic history of late imperial China: handicraft, modern industry and the state* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1995), pp.87–122.

¹¹ See, for example, "Yuesu saomu 越俗掃墓 [The Yue custom of sweeping graves]," in *Tao'an mengyi 陶庵夢憶* [Dreamy recollections of Tao'an], by Zhang Dai 張岱 (repr. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1982), 1.6; "Fengsu ji" 風俗紀 [A record of customs], in *Songchuang mengyu 松窗夢語* [Dreamy discussions at the pine window] (1593), by Zhang Han 張瀚 (repr. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985), 7.139.

¹² For an extensive discussion of the transformation of late Ming society and the role of merchants, see Timothy Brook, *The confusions of pleasure: commerce and culture in Ming China* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999), pp.210–37.

¹³ While there is some information on these issues from earlier on in the Ming, it is not until the beginning of the sixteenth century that sources begin to focus more regularly on these phenomena. Earlier dynasties, too, had witnessed increased reports of similar/

a low-ranking military official. She is mistress of a household filled with equally ambitious concubines and maids who devote their time to leisure activities, winning Ximen Qing's affection and adorning themselves with increasingly elaborate clothing and ornamentation.

Many other texts from the late Ming 明 dynasty⁷ focus upon sartorial habits, most notably those of the merchants and other groups who were traditionally considered lower class.⁸ This was a time of social mobility in which people lower down the social hierarchy were seen to be defining new identities for themselves and their families.⁹ The stabilisation of the monetary system, combined with improvements in transportation and the growth of industry and trade, both domestic and foreign,¹⁰ were all factors leading to a rise in financial prosperity as evidenced in the increasing reports of extravagant displays of material wealth in many areas.¹¹ Merchants were gaining particular benefit from the increase in trade and growth of the luxury goods market, to the extent that they and their families were widely condemned for competing on material terms with their social superiors.¹² This was a time of shifting boundaries, social mobility and emulation.¹³

Conspicuous display of material goods was one way in which aspirations to grandeur could be expressed and the acquisition of clothing and ornamentation by both men and women was no exception, as was pointed out by the seventeenth-century Chinese scholar Ye Mengzhu 葉夢珠: "You could tell at a glance whether someone was noble or base."¹⁴ By encroaching upon these material privileges of the established élite, the very symbols of their social superiority, financially successful groups appear to have been attempting to advance and challenge their position.

As early as 1899, the economist Thorstein Veblen described such behaviour as 'conspicuous consumption,' a practice whereby the conspicuous purchase and display of certain goods evinced financial, and hence social, success.¹⁵ The existing élite would purchase and display items in order to bolster their own standing amongst their peers or to differentiate themselves from those below them on the social scale. New social groups,

/issues towards the fall of a dynasty, to the extent that such phenomena had become a proxy for dynastic decline. However, that these phenomena were mentioned in such a wide variety of sources and contexts during the late Ming suggests that commentators perceived them to be taking place and were a cause for debate, even concern.

¹⁴ "Guanfu" 冠服 [Headwear and clothing], in *Yueshibian 閱世編* [A collection of observations of the world], by Ye Mengzhu (repr. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1981), 8.175. This opinion is not unique to China. Clothing and ornamentation have long been recognised as/

/convenient visual markers of social, political and economic status in many different societies. See, for example, Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in dreams: fashion and modernity* (London: Virago, 1985), pp.25–6; Gilles Lipovetsky, *The empire of fashion: dressing modern democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: New French Thought, 1994), pp.30–1.

¹⁵ Thorstein Veblen, *The theory of the leisure class: an economic study of institutions* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1925), p.167.

however, could adopt the same method to further their aspirations to higher status through envious imitation of behaviour they perceived to be more refined. In explaining the development of consumerism in the West, later social and economic historians have used this theory that is based on the principle that taste tended to be transmitted from the court to the gentry, and from there to lower ranks of society.¹⁶

However, the theory that all emulation is of the trickle-down variety has come into question. Fashion historian Christopher Breward, for example, has argued that it is more likely that desirable elite goods would be found in the households of urban retailers with the middle classes being missed out altogether.¹⁷ Furthermore, although a useful tool for looking at the way material goods are purchased and displayed, emulation is not necessarily the sole rationale for consumption. Colin Campbell and Paul Glennie are just two of the many sociologists who have questioned such accounts of all-embracing consumer motivation and suggest that other, more complex, responses to consumables could exist simultaneously. They argue that such goods may serve to fulfil a vast range of functions, both personal and social, as geography, class and gender, all play a role in determining individual and group responses to material goods.¹⁸ Attitudes towards sartorial habits can be influenced by various factors and the concept of sartorial grandeur may vary dramatically not only between social classes, geographical areas or genders, but also between individuals of the same gender, class and geographical location. A closer examination of materials from the late Ming could reveal more detailed insights into the sartorial behaviour of women with social aspirations and how their conduct was perceived by contemporary observers.

In many societies, the history of clothing and the history of social, economic and political behaviour are intimately linked; Josephine Miller goes further to suggest that the study of dress and women's history are inseparable.¹⁹ Research on female sartorial behaviour in pre-modern China is now being recognised as an integral aspect of socio-historical investigation. Timothy Brook, for example, has shown how clothing and clothing fashions in general not only played a role in the developing economy of the late Ming, but also formed a significant part of the elite discourse on social ideology.²⁰ Wu Renshu has elaborated this latter point and detailed the various gentry reactions, both in terms of discourse and action, to sartorial emulation by the lower classes during this period.²¹ Dorothy Ko has examined aspects of female fashions in the Ming and Qing dynasties, focusing in particular on the multiple and changing meanings of footbinding.²²

Building on these previous findings, this paper will focus on the late Ming discourse on certain aspects of female clothing and ornamentation. First, it will discuss how the hierarchical nature of Chinese society provided templates for the clothing behaviour of all social classes, effectively defining genteel clothing practices, and it will demonstrate how emulation of aspects of elite female clothing and ornamentation in particular

¹⁶ See, for example, Neil McKendrick, "The commercialization of fashion," in *The birth of a consumer society: the commercialization of eighteenth-century England*, ed. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb (London: Hutchinson, 1983), pp.34–99.

¹⁷ Christopher Breward, *The culture of fashion: a new history of fashionable dress* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp.131–2.

¹⁸ Colin Campbell, "The sociology of consumption," in *Acknowledging consumption: a review of new studies*, ed. Daniel Miller (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.96–126, esp. pp.111–17; Paul Glennie, "Consumption with-in historical studies," in Miller, *Acknowledging consumption*, pp.164–203, esp. p.179.

¹⁹ Josephine Miller, "The study of dress and textiles," in *Design history—a student's handbook*, ed. Hazel Conway (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), p.15. See also Daniel Roche, *The culture of clothing: dress and fashion in the 'Ancien Régime'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.502–3.

²⁰ Brook, *The confusions of pleasure*, pp. 218–22.

²¹ Wu Renshu, "Mingdai pingmin fushi de liuxing fengshang yu shidafu de fanying" [Clothing fashions popular among the ordinary people in the Ming and the reactions of the gentry], in *Xin Shixue* [New Historical Studies] 10.3 (1999): 55–107.

²² See, in particular, Dorothy Ko, "Bondage in time: footbinding and fashion theory," *Fashion Theory* 1.1 (1997): 3–27; id., *Every step a lotus: shoes for bound feet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001). Valerie Steele and John S. Major have taken a look at the broader picture of Chinese fashion developments. See idem eds., *China chic: East meets West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

²³ Marilyn J. Horn, *The second skin: an interdisciplinary study of clothing* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p.75.

²⁴ Craig Clunas, *Pictures and visuality in early modern China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), esp. pp.102–33; Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *Representing the English Renaissance* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1988), pp.vii–viii.

was used by lower social classes in an attempt to boost social prestige and create an appearance of grandeur. Second, it will demonstrate how certain factors affected the passage of clothing styles between women. Increasing female visibility, in particular, led to more opportunities for emulation, competition and variation from prescribed norms, whilst failures in regulation and distribution, both inside and outside the household, further compounded the situation. Finally, it will show how a conservative reaction to these trends attempted to restore a more idealistic order through a new discourse of female clothing and ornamentation that focused on the exemplification of frugality.

The sources analysed range from the novel *Jin Ping Mei* to official documents, contemporary artefacts to jottings and essays. Throughout, the paper will demonstrate how such contrasting sources—material and textual, purportedly historical or purportedly fictional—reveal varying perceptions of female clothing practices in the late Ming. The paper will also illuminate how the concept of sartorial grandeur circulated, from representations of social behaviour in pictorial images and texts of all types and back again through the distribution and consumption of these materials. Material culture may, in fact, have just as much to do with engendering social, cultural and political behaviour as merely reflecting it. Marilyn J. Horn suggests that “clothing has a reciprocal effect on social attitudes and values; it reflects the ideals already extant, but also shapes ideas in the direction of change.”²³

However, sartorial culture extends beyond the artefacts themselves. Evidence can also be found in visual and textual images, both of which are capable of shaping and being shaped by behaviour and practice, as Craig Clunas and Stephen Greenblatt have shown.²⁴ Viewed in this way, literary texts such as the *Jin Ping Mei* are potentially useful sources of information on dress and ornamentation and their relationship with the projection of grandeur. Of course, fictional works do not necessarily depict actual social situations or events (and the same could be said of paintings or historical texts), but they can reveal the concerns and preoccupations of the time, both in terms of the voices of the individual characters as they emerge from the narrative and in terms of the voices of the literati who created them. Put alongside visual images, contemporary artefacts, official and historical writings, a more complete view of female dress and ornamentation begins to emerge.

Clothing Hierarchies

Late-Ming dress and ornamentation was, theoretically, regulated according to sex, class and occupation. Numerous items ranging in quality

were produced to match the complex social hierarchy with the highest level of products being singled out for use by the ruling élite. Many such items, including jewellery, head-dresses, and even clothing and textiles, have survived in the tombs of the upper classes and begin to provide some idea of the sartorial choices of the more socially and politically powerful in society.²⁵ This hierarchical structure of sumptuary regulation can be seen as a state attempt to define status in terms of clothing and ornamentation. Those at the top of the social ladder were permitted to adorn themselves in symbols that visibly expressed their power and wealth. So, in a similar way to legal regulations, these objects played an important role in social definition, coherence and stability.²⁶

The regulations as contained in the “Clothing and Headwear” (*yiguan* 衣冠) section of the *Da Ming buidian* 大明會典 of 1587 set out in minute detail the requirements for every rank. From the Empress down to the common woman, styles and materials used for robes and skirts, decorations on emblems of rank, types of head-dresses and even which particular jewels should be used to embellish them are all prescribed. Embroidery, damasks, brocades and other patterned silks in dark colours such as dark blue, green and scarlet, for example, were reserved for the upper classes. Commoner women were permitted to wear only thin silk cloth in light colours such as pale blue, lilac, peach; they were also restricted to silver and gilt-silver jewellery.²⁷ The higher the social status, the more ornate the apparel, the more restricted the items, and a woman’s status depended before marriage upon the status of her father and, after marriage, upon that of her husband or son. The mother or wife of an official became a ‘lady of rank’ (*mingfu* 命婦) and was entitled to wear official garments that varied according to the rank of the husband or son.

Clothing and ornaments for the majority of women were divided into two main types in the Ming—one for ceremonies or celebrations (*lifu* 禮服) and the other for normal wear (*changfu* 常服). The formal dress of a Ming woman of rank, for example, principally comprised a piece of outer clothing emblazoned with symbols of rank. This was commonly ornamented with a *xiapei* 霞帔 or ‘rosy-cloud stole’ and a decorative belt, both of which were subject to strict specifications in size and patterning. On her head she would have worn a head-dress of varying decoration according to rank and which would have been supplemented by other pieces of jewellery. The outfit for normal wear would comprise a long robe decorated in the same style as the *xiapei*, matched with a skirt, plus various hair ornaments. This form of sumptuary regulation provided a template of officially-sanctioned symbols of social superiority.

Social Mobility and Emulation

In contrast to the strict hierarchical world found in official sumptuary

²⁵ See, for example, excavation notes from Ming tombs of the imperial household and élite: Jiangxisheng Wenwu Gongzuodui, “Jiangxi Nancheng Ming Yiding Wang Zhu Youmu mu fajue jianbao” [An excavation bulletin from the Ming tomb of Zhu Youmu, Prince of Yiding, in Nancheng, Jiangxi], *Wenwu* [Cultural relics], 1982.2: 56–64; Jiangxisheng Huai’anxian Bowuguan, “Huai’anxian Mingdai Wang Zhen fufu hezangmu qingli jianbao” [A bulletin of the findings from the Ming tomb of Wang Zhen and his wife in Huai’an County], *Wenwu*, 1987.3: 1–15.

²⁶ Jessica Rawson, ed., *The British Museum book of Chinese art* (London: British Museum Press, 1992), p.28. All kinds of symbols and cultural devices such as rituals and ceremonies are used to define the boundaries of status groups in many societies. See Barry Barnes, *The nature of power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p.97.

²⁷ *Da Ming buidian* [Encyclopedia of the Great Ming] (1587), by Shen Shixing 申時行, *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 [Revised edition of the complete works from the four collections] (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1995), *juan* 60–1. Also detailed in the later *Ming shi* 明史 [History of the Ming], by Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉, reprint ed., 20 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1974), *juan* 65–8.

²⁸ This was the highest rank of official; the lowest numbered rank was nine.

²⁹ *JPMCH*, 40.9b

³⁰ The *Ming Taizu shilu* states the date July 5th 1391 as the initiation of badges of rank to be used for the State Sacrifices, for court functions and for everyday wear: *Ming Taizu shilu* 明太祖實錄 [Veritable records of Ming Taizu], reprint ed., 8 vols. (Beijing: Zhongyang Yanjiuyuan Lishi Yuyan Yanjiusuo, 1968), *juan* 209.

regulation, the female characters of the *Jin Ping Mei* reveal quite a different picture of female sartorial behaviour and suggest that such guidelines for dress and ornamentation may have been more negotiable in practice. Moreover, that the wives of a pseudo-official are depicted as wearing clothing of rank and status may also serve to highlight literati concerns regarding the social phenomena that surrounded them. Indeed the late-Ming discourse on such phenomena indicates some confusion over what exactly constituted elegant dress and ornamentation.

The outfit as worn by Wu Yueniang in the above excerpt from the *Jin Ping Mei* shows the wholesale adoption of the clothing and ornamentation of the highest echelons of female society. Though written in a fictional

context, such behaviour is reflected in both contemporary 'historical' accounts and in the archaeological record. It appears as though wives, mothers and daughters were also joining in the trend for upward emulation. Enjoyment of the fruits of financial gain and social mobility were clearly not restricted to the male members of a family.

The major component of Wu Yueniang's outfit is the *tongxiu* gown (*tongxiu pao* 通袖袍), an item of formal dress designated for women of the imperial household and wives of ranked officials. *Tongxiu* indicates that the pattern embroidered onto the gown extended from the back and chest down the sleeves; hence, the 'hundred animals face the qilin' (*baishou chao qilin* 百獸朝麒麟) pattern probably indicated that there was a *qilin* decorating the chest and back and that these were surrounded by many smaller animals. An illustration from the *Jin Ping Mei* (Figure 1) shows Wu Yueniang clothed in her *tongxiu* gown, followed closely by the other concubines in similar attire. A portrait of the

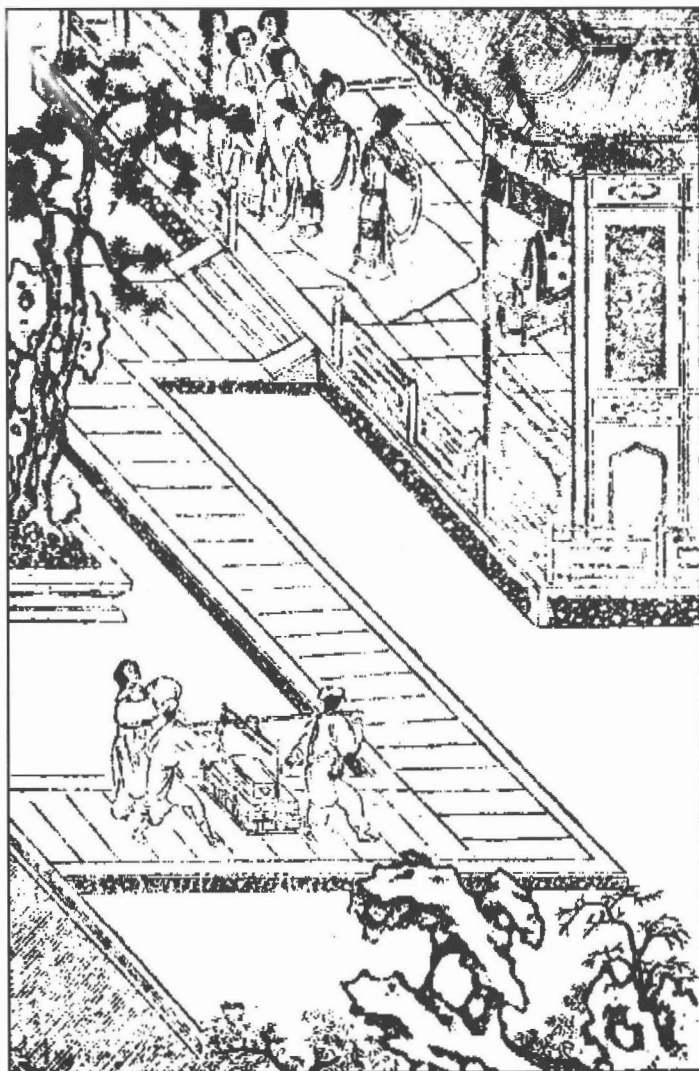


Figure 1

An illustration entitled "Flaunting her wealth, Wu Yueniang arranges a profitable match" from Chapter 43 of the *Jin Ping Mei* showing Wu Yueniang and the other ladies of the Ximen household dressed in their formal attire as they meet with ladies of the Qiao household. (Reproduced from *Jin Ping Mei* cihua by permission of the Commercial Press [Hong Kong])

mother of Senior Grand Secretary (first rank)²⁸ Li Chunfang 李春芳 (1510–84), demonstrates how the *tongxiu* pattern may have actually worked in practice (Figure 2). Here, the intricate dragon pattern forms a continuous whole around the main body and sleeves of the gown. This particular style was known as the ‘cross-shoulder dragon’ (*guojian mang* 過肩蟒).

During the initial tailoring of Wu Yueniang’s outfit in Chapter 40 of *Jin Ping Mei*, the *qilin* emblem is described as a ‘badge of rank’ (*buzi* 補子; also known as *bufang* 補方).²⁹ These first appeared in 1391³⁰ and were to be worn on the front of gowns as indicators of the different ranks of the imperial household and officials. Members of the imperial household were represented by the dragon, phoenix, tartar pheasant and *qilin*. Lower down the scale, various birds represented civil officials and animals symbolised the ranks of military officials. Each grade of official was entitled to wear a specific emblem as set out in the sumptuary laws.³¹ Late-Ming records lack any reference to the symbols designated for the wives of officials; however, other sources such as the later *Qinghai leichao* 清稗類鈔 (Collected anecdotes from the unofficial history of the Qing), state that mothers were entitled to decorate their gowns with the badge of rank of their son.³²

Ming ancestral portraits show us that the wife wore the square badge of her husband’s rank. Figure 3 forms a detail from the painting of the family of Zhou Yong 周用 (1476–1547), from Wujiang 吳江 in Suzhou 蘇州 prefecture, who rose to the position of Minister of Personnel (second

³¹ For further information on the use and development of squares, see “Yifu” 衣服 sections of the *Ming shi*, *juan* 66–7; *Sancai tubui* 三才圖會 [Sancai pictorial encyclopedia] (1585), by Wang Qi 王圻, reprint ed., 6 vols. (Taipei: Chengwen Chubanshe, 1970), 2.30a–35a.

³² *Qinghai leichao*, by Xu Ke 徐珂, reprint ed., 13 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1986), 13.6199; “Neizhuang 內裝 [Inner attire],” in *Yueshi bian*, 8.180.

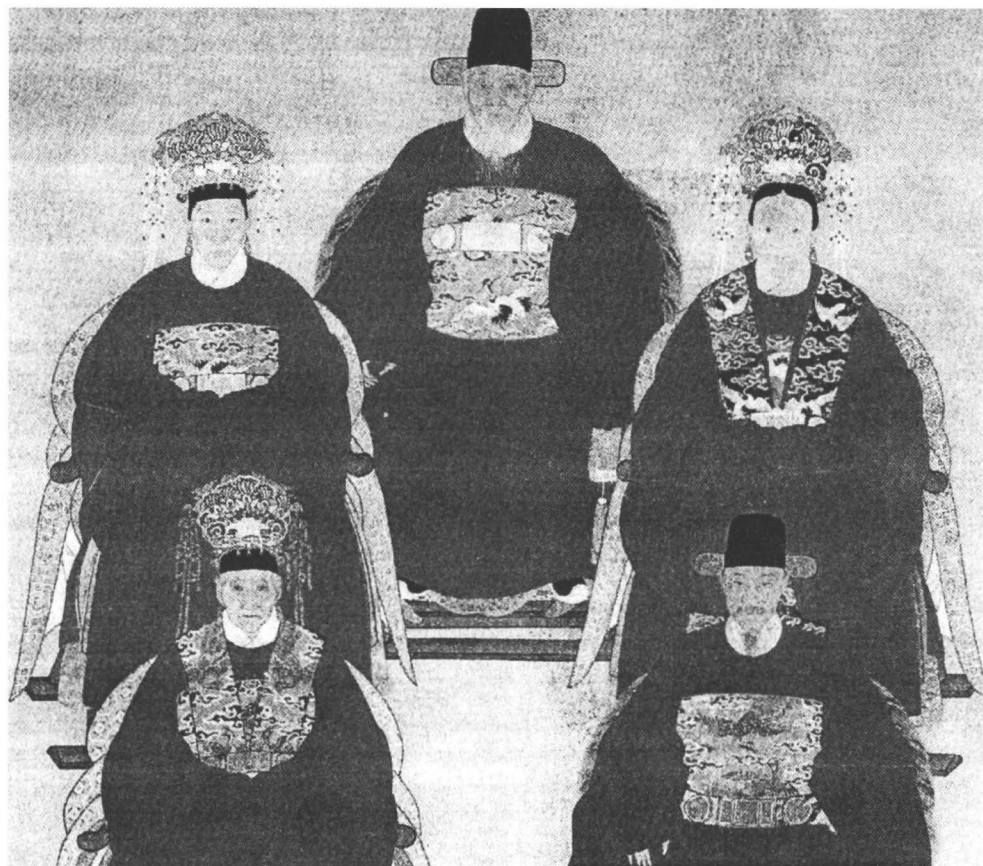


Figure 2

Ancestral portrait of the mother of Li Chunfang. She is dressed in a red gown ornamented with a gold and green dragon motif across the body and shoulders. Note the relatively detailed attention paid to the clothing as opposed to the facial features of the sitter—a clear indication that the portrait was just as much a display of the deceased’s place in the social system as a reminder of their person. (From Liang Baiquan, Selected Chinese Portrait Paintings from the Nanjing Museum [Hong Kong: Tai Yip Co., 1993], figure 18)

Figure 3

A detail from the ancestral portrait depicting several generations of the house of Zhou Yong pictured centre top. All are dressed in identical red robes, but with varying emblems emblazoned on their badges of rank and differing belt styles. Notice also how the bird symbols on the *xiapei* match the patterns on the wearer's badge of rank. (From Liang Baiquan, *Selected Chinese Portrait Paintings from the Nanjing Museum*, figure 9)



³³ Liang Baiquan, *Selected Chinese portrait paintings from the Nanjing Museum* (Hong Kong: Tai Yip Co., 1993), p.146.

³⁴ Prior to 1527, the crane was applicable to both rank one and rank two. Valerie M. Garrett, *Chinese clothing: an illustrated guide* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.15.

³⁵ Schulyer Cammann, "The development of the Mandarin Square," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8 (1944–45): 71–130, esp. p.105.

³⁶ *JPMCH*, 31.5a. Wang Shizhen commented that, although there are animals set for all the military ranks below three, people "all wear the lion and it is not prohibited in the least." See *Gu Bugu lu* 鰐不鰐錄 [The record of Gu Bugu] by Wang Shizhen 王世貞, reprinted. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985), p.13.

rank). Pictured are Zhou Yong, his wife Mme Shi 施氏 and concubine Mme Jiang 薑氏. Below are his son Zhou Shinan 周式南 (*juren* 舉人 1558), a Chief Minister at the Court of the Imperial Stud (third rank) and his wife Mme Yu 鬱氏.³³ They are wearing the symbols of cranes and peacocks appropriate to their respective ranks.³⁴ By contrast, Wu Yueniang sports the *qilin* emblem (Figure 4), which was reserved as the symbol for dukes, earls and imperial sons-in-law and their wives.³⁵ Yet, at this time her husband Ximen Qing is merely a military official of the fifth grade permitted only to wear the symbol of a bear; however, he too is guilty of adopting the superior lion badge of rank (first and second grade), a familiar occurrence at this time among military officials below the third grade.³⁶

In Taizhou 泰州 (Jiangsu 江蘇) an example of an inappropriate badge of rank was unearthed from the tomb of Zhang Panlong 張盤龍, daughter of Zhang Cunjian 張存簡, Director of the Board of Punishments, and wife of Xu Fan 徐蕃, the Right Vice Director of the Ministry of Works, who died in the Jiajing 嘉靖 period (1522–66). A jade-coloured *qilin* was woven onto badges of rank on the chest and back of her plain satin outer clothing. The layer of clothing beneath, tailored from bean-yellow satin patterned with the 'eight treasures and flowers,' was decorated with badges of rank on the chest and back depicting two cranes (first

grade). According to the regulations, she was supposed only to wear a peacock, following the rank of her husband, who was a third grade official.³⁷ The archaeological record, therefore, confirms that the way in which Wu Yueniang adopts symbols of rank appears to have been a common phenomenon during this time of social ambition and suggests that not only women of the lower classes were guilty of transgressing the regulations.

In addition to a prohibited gown, Wu Yueniang is described as wearing a gold belt inlaid with various precious stones (*jinxiangbaoshi naozhuang* 金鑲寶石鬧妝).³⁸ Just like badges of rank, belt styles and materials were also highly regulated according to rank. This particular design was designated for the use of someone of the third grade or above. An indication of the exclusive nature of this type of belt can be demonstrated by the fact that several examples are listed in an inventory of the estate of the notoriously corrupt minister Grand Secretary Yan Song 嚴嵩 (1480–1565) and his son Yan Shifan 嚴世蕃 (1513–64).³⁹ Figure 5 shows a belt discovered in Sichuan 四川, in the tomb of a certain Wang Han 王瀚. The belt is made of gold and inset with a wide variety of precious stones, perhaps similar to the one worn by the fictional Wu Yueniang. And again, such an item gives some indication of the wealth and influence required to obtain such things.

Wu Yueniang's outfit is topped off by a chignon ornamented with phoenix hairclasp. Combined, these seem to give the impression of a phoenix head-dress. A true phoenix head-dress would have been made of gold and silver wire lined with silk gauze and the top inlaid with pearls and jewels. The Empress was entitled to wear one decorated with nine dragons and four phoenixes; lower grades were entitled to wear correspondingly fewer creatures. The head-dress shown in Figure 6 was excavated from the tomb of the lower-ranking Mme Liu 劉氏 from Qichun 圻春 county in Hubei 湖北 and is decorated with a single phoenix.

Wu Yueniang, however, makes do with a pair of phoenix hairpins. Yet even these items were not easily come by. Figure 7 depicts a pair of gold hairpins excavated from the tomb of Prince Zhu Youbin 朱祐檣

Figure 4

An illustration of the qilin badge of rank from the "Clothing and Headwear" section of the 1585 encyclopedia Sancai tuhui. The actual badge of rank would have been embroidered in various colours, often highlighted with gold thread, and would have decorated both the front and back of the gown. This ensured that the status of the wearer could be identified at a distance. (Repr. Taipei: Chengwen Chubanshe, 1970, p.1541)



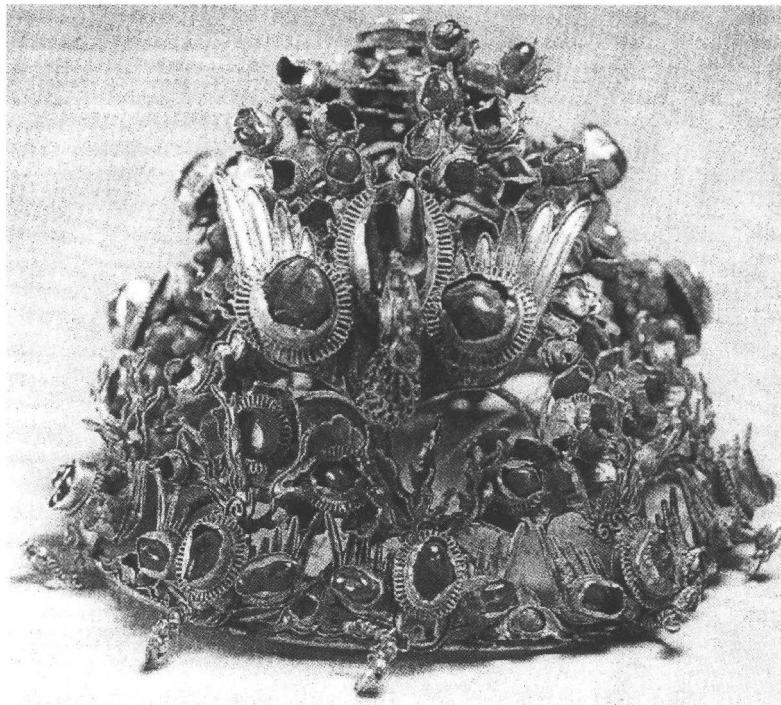
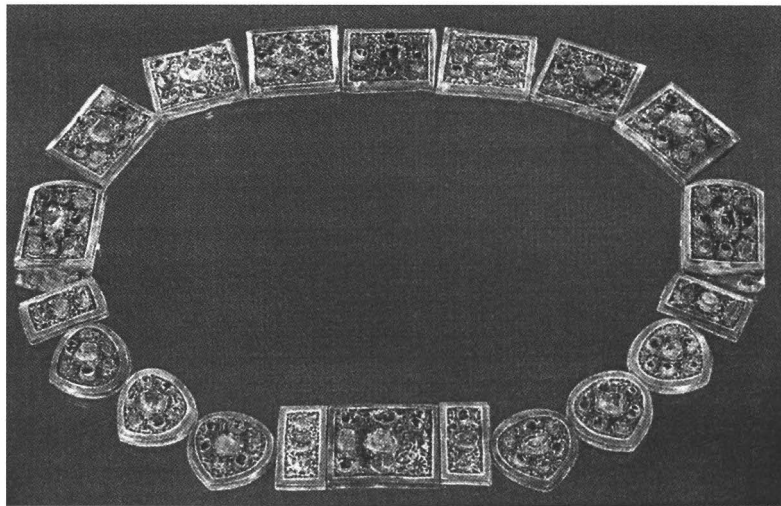
³⁷ Taizhou shi bowuguan, "Jiangsu Taizhou shi Mingdai Xu Fan fufu mu qingli jianbao" [A bulletin of the findings from the Ming tomb of Xu Fan and his wife in Taizhou, Jiangsu], *Wenwu*, 1986.9: 1–15.

³⁸ *JPMCH*, 43.11a.

³⁹ *Tianshui Bingshan lu* 天水冰山錄 [A record of Tianshui and Bingshan], *Ming Wuzong waiji* 明武宗外紀 [Further records from the reign of Ming Wuzong] edn., reprint ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian, 1982), pp.94–5.

Figure 5

A 20-piece gold belt composed of rectangular and peach-shaped sections. The sections have a background of intertwined lotus flowers in gold filigree with the lotus petals formed from precious gems. All have hooks on the reverse that would have been used to attach them to a leather belt. (From Zhongguo bowuguan congshu 12 – Sichuan bowuguan [China Museum Series 12 – Sichuan Museum] [Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1992], figure 192)



that were made in the palace workshops and the exquisite workmanship required for such ornaments is amply demonstrated.⁴⁰ Excavations of the Nanjing tomb of the Grand Tutor Xu Fu 徐備 (1450–1517) have uncovered evidence of a use of hairpins similar to the way in which the fictional Yueniang employs them. Here, a head-dress decorated with coiled pearls threaded on silver wire was ornamented with four pairs of hairpins and hairclasps, including a gold phoenix pair, inserted on either side. The ornaments belonged to Xu Fu's first wife Mme Zhu 朱氏, a 'Lady of the State of Wei' (*Weiguo furen* 魏國夫人).⁴¹ Such head ornamentation was worn by the wives of officials and give an indication of the image recreated by the fictional character Wu Yueniang. From a contemporary painting of the goddess Chang'e 嫦娥 by the renowned mid-Ming artist Tang Yin 唐寅 (1470–1524), it can be seen how such gold phoenix pins (and here a *xiapei*, too) were so admired

⁴⁰ Jiangxisheng Bowuguan, "Jiangxi Nancheng Ming Yiwang Zhu Youbin mu fajue baogao" [An excavation bulletin from the Ming tomb of Zhu Youbin, Prince of Yi, in Nancheng, Jiangxi], *Wenwu*, 1973.3: 36.

Figure 6

A single phoenix head-dress from the tomb of Mme Liu. Precious stones of blue and red are set into the gold framework to form flowers and additional ornamentation on the wings of the bird. Such headwear would have been further supplemented with strings of pearls and/or other precious gems as can be seen in Figures 2 and 3. (From Zhou Xun and Gao Chunming, *Zhongguo lidai funü zhuangshi* [Chinese historical female clothing and ornamentation] [Shanghai: Xuelin Chubanshe, 1988], p.98)

that they were even considered adornments fit for an immortal (Figure 8).

Contemporary observer Zhang Han 張瀚 (1511–93) laments this imitation of upper-class ornamentation by the women of his time:

The pearl and kingfisher head-dress, and dragon and phoenix dress and ornamentation can only be worn by Empresses and Principal Consorts. The ceremonial dress of the wives of officials of the fourth rank and above use gold ornaments, whereas those of the fifth grade and below used gilt silver ornaments. The wide sleeved robes of the fifth rank and above are made of fine silks, damasks and tussorees, whereas that of the sixth grade and below are made of damasks, tussorees, satins, and thin silks; all have their limits. Yet nowadays, men wear brocade and fine silks and women decorate themselves with gold and pearls—this is boundless extravagance that disregards the prohibitions of the state.⁴²

Although his plaint, typical of the period, does not go into the details of the alleged arrogations, it does reveal that not only were men seen to be exceeding the regulations, women too are criticised for indulging in luxurious clothing and ornamentation. Conservative officials such as Zhang Han would have had an agenda in writing such reports, usually as a form of remonstrance or as a show of public indignation. However, that these sorts of observations tend to be found in their unofficial writings and jottings, which would have had a more limited circulation, would suggest that occurrences such as the above, although exaggerated in some instances, were perceived to have been taking place.

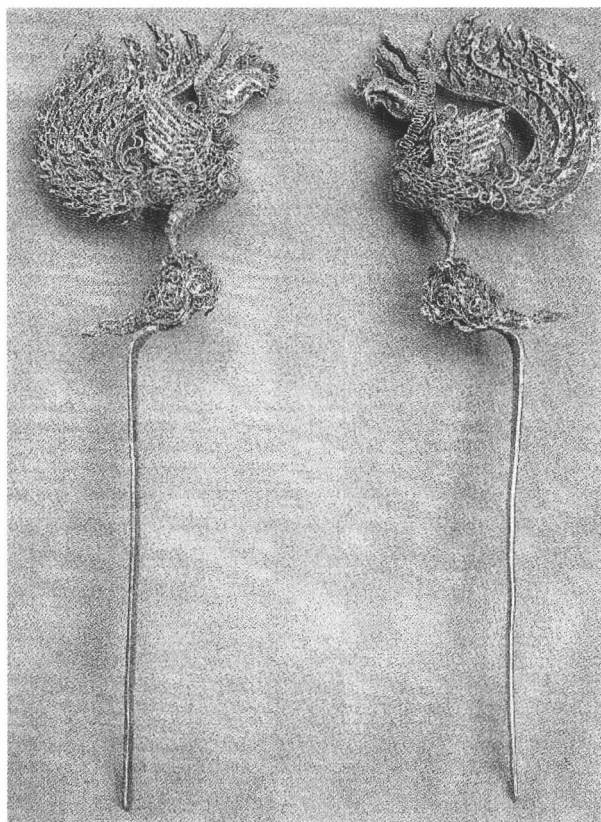
With sumptuary regulation creating a society that could be stratified through material display, expenditure on dress and ornamentation was seen by those lower down the social ladder to be highly effective in promoting an appearance of grandeur and gentility. These items were externally visible indicators of wealth and social superiority. Such emulation of higher-class sartorial behaviour and conspicuous consumption were particularly prominent in the commercially vibrant centres in established metropolitan areas and in towns along the developing trade routes.

The *Jin Ping Mei* is set in the fictional town of Qinghe in Shandong, close to the banks of the Grand Canal, the main North-South transport artery. The Yuncheng 鄆城 (Shandong) gazetteer from the late Ming demonstrates how such provincial towns were certainly not immune to the trends of the larger metropolitan areas:

Recently, people have been competing in extravagance. The masses wear the

Figure 7

Matching phoenix hairpins uncovered in the tomb of Prince Zhu Youbin. The two birds formed from gold filigree. (From Zhou Xun and Gao Chunming, Zhongguo lidai funü zhuangshi [Chinese historical female clothing and ornamentation] [Shanghai: Xuelin Chubanshe, 1988], p.64)



⁴¹ Nanjing Shi Wenhua Baoguan Weiyuanhui and Nanjing Shi Bowuguan, "Ming Xu Da wushisun Xu Fu fufu mu" [The Ming tomb of Xu Fu, fifth generation grandson of Xu Da, and his wife], *Wenwu*, 1982.2: 28–32.

⁴² "Fengsu ji," in *Songchuang mengyu*, 7.140.

Figure 8

A detail from "Chang'e Flees to the Moon" (*Chang'e ben yue tu* 嫦娥奔月圖) by Tang Yin, the style of which can be said to be representative of paintings of beautiful women from this period. Chang'e is depicted in a simple gown decorated with a xiapei emblazoned with a bird and cloud motif. Most attention is paid to her hair ornamentation, from the simple flower-shaped hairpin over the ear to the tiara on top of her swept-back hair. The phoenix pin decorating her chignon is highly reminiscent of the hairpins unearthed in the tomb of Zhu Youbin. (From Baimei tu shuo [An explanation of the paintings of the one hundred beauties] [Shanghai: Shanghai Huabao Chubanshe, 2001], p.38)



⁴³ *Yunchengxianzhi* 鄆城縣志 [Yuncheng County gazeteer]. Cited in Xia Xianchun, *WanMing tufeng yu wenxue* [Local customs and literature in the late Ming] (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 1994), p.31.

⁴⁴ *JPMCH*, 40.8b–10a.

clothing of the gentry, the gentry wear the headgear of the high officials; from food, drink and utensils to marriages, funerals, outings and banquet, the old notions have all changed. Those who are poor even herd oxen laden with fresh goods and engage in joint worship and communal sacrifices, competing with the rich in grandeur and opulence to the extent that they think nothing of emptying their purses.⁴³

Such non-fictional works criticise these phenomena and mock those who appear to be under an impression that a rise in status could be effected merely by the adoption of upper class sartorial habits and other trappings of gentility through financial means.

Although the *Jin Ping Mei* is similarly satirical in tone and mocks the progress of such new social groups, female voices from within the narrative framework of the novel, by contrast, reveal a more positive reaction to the increasing opportunities to wear newly-tailored clothing of rank. The female characters are quite unaware that their sartorial behaviour is anything out of the ordinary; indeed, for people of their status not to wear garments of rank on visits outside the household would be demeaning, hence the hurried rush to tailor their outfits in time for a visit to the ladies of the Qiao 喬 household.⁴⁴ Although of merchant-official status, the women feel the need to compete in appearance with the ladies of the Qiao household, a former gentry family who have fallen on hard times. Adoption of clothing of rank furthers their aspirations to social superiority in the eyes of the local community.

If Wu Yueniang's outfit is taken as a whole, it is comprised of a patchwork of items appropriated from different ranks, ranging from the higher grades of officialdom right up to the hereditary nobility. The reasons for this are not explicitly stated in the novel; however, the celebratory tone of the novel as it depicts such sartorial behaviour highlights the literati fear as evidenced in other sources that unconventional clothing was becoming more common. As Wu Renshu has shown, literati writings

often criticised such new clothing as “aberrant” (*yao* 妖) or ridiculed it as “common” (*su* 俗).⁴⁵ However, it was perhaps not always the case that women of the merchant class were failing in their attempts to imitate the perceived gentility of upper class women due to their inappropriate use of clothing and ornamentation and lack of knowledge of sumptuary regulation. As demonstrated above, the articles of clothing found in the tomb of Zhang Panlong reveal that such behaviour was occurring among the women higher up the social scale in the households of officials where ignorance of the regulations would have been unlikely. They, too, were combining regulated clothing in an unconventional manner.

Female Visibility and Imitation

A possible explanation for this unconventional matching of items of dress and ornamentation by women from opposite ends of the social spectrum could be visual emulation. This method would have allowed discrepancies to be passed on unfettered by prescriptive dictates. Fashion commentator Marilyn J. Horn was one of the first to identify an increased freedom of women as one of the major factors accelerating sartorial competition among women in Western societies where increasing emancipation and general physical visibility in the wider society enabled women to imitate and develop new modes of dress.⁴⁶ Evidence suggests that this form of emulation may have been a significant factor during this period in China.

In sixteenth-century China, life for women was still relatively restricted when compared to their contemporaries in Europe. However, the economic and cultural changes of the time were facilitating changes in female social behaviour to the extent that opportunities arose for women to venture out of the inner quarters to engage in the same conspicuous consumption as the male members of their families.⁴⁷ Conspicuous consumption evidently required a point of reference or a template for emulation, and what better than visual contact for the accumulation of information on the accoutrements of gentility?

In a diatribe against the behaviour of the women of the gentry households (*shijia* 世家) in the affluent Yangzi region, the well-respected late-Ming writer Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558–1639) demonstrates particular concern over the possible threat of openly competitive emulation by the lower classes in his native area:

Recently, they have been sporting dazzling adornments and resplendent dress; they love to make themselves beautiful. Their looks are flirtatious and their language is suggestive; they love behaving in a licentious manner. They are fond of going on jaunts to famous mountains and embankments on valuable horses and painted boats. In the beginning, those who were acquainted with this gasped, when it continued they laughed. Worst of all, if the women of the villages take it as customary, admire it and copy it, it

⁴⁵ Wu Renshu, “Mingdai pingmin fushi,” pp.95–103.

⁴⁶ Horn, *The second skin*, pp.215–17.

⁴⁷ S. A. M. Adshead, *Material culture in Europe and China, 1400–1800: the rise of consumerism* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1997), p.25.

⁴⁸ “Shou Gu gongren wushi xu 壽顧恭人

五十紱 [Congratulating Mme Gu, a 'lady of respect', on her fiftieth birthday], in *Wanxiangtang xiaopin* 晚香堂小品 [Essays from the Wanxiang Studio], by Chen Meigong 陳眉公 (Chen Jiru), reprint ed., 2 vols. (Shanghai: Beiye Shanfang, 1936), 16.285–6. Sentiments echoed in "Neizhuang," in *Yueshi bian*, 8.178; "Fengsu 風俗 [Customs]," in *Kezuo zhuiyu* 客座贅語 [Honourable sayings of guests], by Gu Qiyuan 顧起元, reprint ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1987), 1.26.

⁴⁹ *Guang zhi yi* 廣志譯 [More thoughts on records from around the Empire] (1597), by Wang Shixing 王士性, reprint ed., (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1981), 2.18. Emphasis my own.

⁵⁰ *Goushan xiansheng ji* 縉山先生集 [The collected works of Mr Goushan] (Wanli), by Wang Feng 王衡, repr. in *Mingren wenji congkan* [The collected works of Ming authors series], ed. Shen Yunlong (Taipei: Wenhai Chubanshe, 1970), 14.36b.

⁵¹ Yu Songqing, "Ming Qing shiqi minjian

will be impossible to halt this trend.⁴⁸

This passage portrays a general acceptance of the ongoing outrageous behaviour of the gentry women; its durability has meant that it has become a joke. When social boundaries were beginning to be threatened, however, it was a different case altogether. Hence, Chen's anxieties lie rather with the effects this may have on those below them in the social scale, those in the less affluent areas who aspired to higher status—as long as the social distinctions were intact the perceived problem was somewhat lessened. However, increasing opportunities for contact was leading to emulation and, as a result, the visual markers of status were becoming a less reliable guide to identification of an individual's place in the social hierarchy.

Chen's comments particularly emphasise the competitive nature of women who came into visual contact with each other. Despite the fact that didactic Neo-Confucian texts encouraged the confinement of women to the household during this period, many commentators perceived that women of all classes were emerging to varying degrees from sequestration. In his discussions on the two capitals, "Liang du 兩都," the Ming official and geographer Wang Shixing 王士性 (1547–98) writes:

The people of the capital love to go out, and *this is particularly true of the women*. Each New Year's Day they pay New Year visits. On the sixteenth they 'cross the bridges' and 'walk off the one hundred illnesses' when lantern light shines throughout the night. On the night of the fifteenth of the first lunar month there are lantern festivals. Lofty mansions are adorned with decoration and people hustle and jostle about. At the Qingming festival they go out for walks in the countryside and the panoramic view from the Gaoliang Bridge is as pretty as a picture. In the third month it is the birthday of the God of the Eastern Peak so they play in the pine forests. On such occasions, groups of three or five meet up, loosen their skirts and sit down around a pine tree to play dice and make sacrificial offerings from grass. Although carts and horses trundle by, they pay them no heed. Back at someone's house they put on tall head-dresses and wide-sleeved robes, engage in drunken dances and play donkey-back. Sometimes they fall off and lie on the floor having completely forgotten that they are not in their own home. It is only once the Mid-Autumn festival has passed that these outings cease. The ancients said: "Under the carriage of the Emperor the people crowd together." No wonder drunken people are considered auspicious.⁴⁹

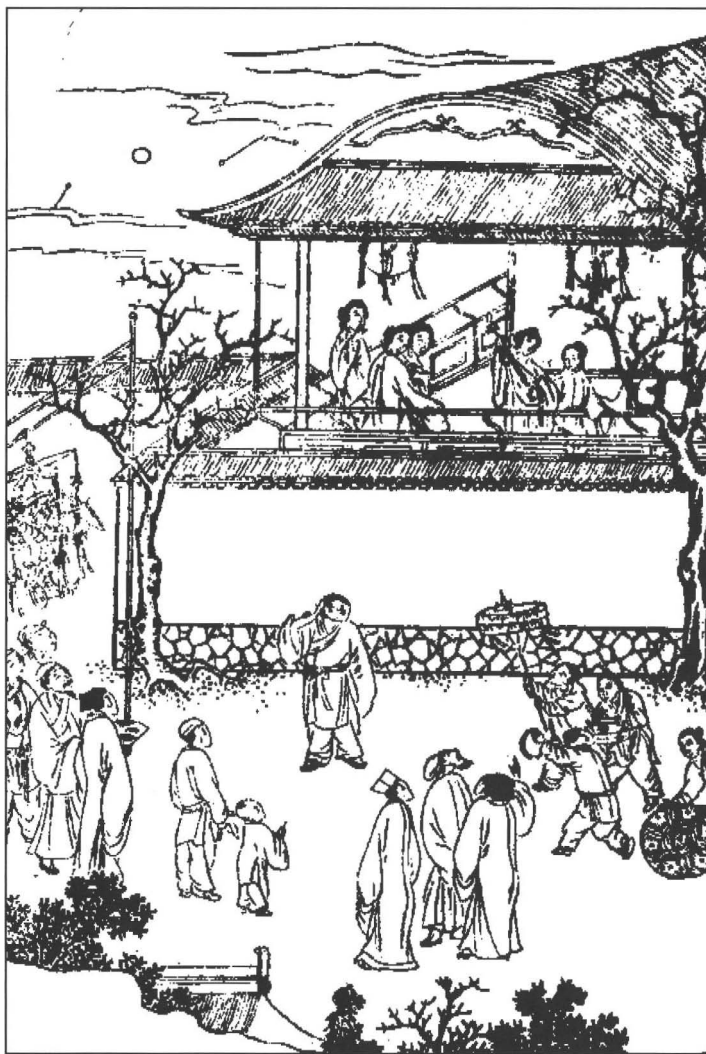
Although he is critical of some of the aspects of female drunken behaviour, Wang and others appear to suggest that it was acceptable for women to make outings outside of their homes. Both contemporary accounts and literary sources also stress the increasing tendency for women to take on a more visible appearance, not only on social or festival occasions, but also at ritual events. For example, it was said of Lady Zhu 朱, from the wealthy gentry family of Wang Xijue 王錫爵 (1534–1611), that she alone refused to set foot outside the house to go on pilgrimages to mountain temples.⁵⁰ This suggests that other women from her household were taking such trips and did not

consider them unbecoming for ladies of their class. Confucian moralists were particularly concerned by this increasing popularity in women of all classes visiting temples to worship female goddesses.⁵¹

Class could be a significant factor in female attitudes towards sequestration. In wealthier or more educated families, such as that of Lady Zhu, there could be social rewards in seclusion for women as they could, according to Francesca Bray, be commended for 'a moral purity and clarity of vision beyond that of their men.'⁵² For those women who were less literate or less wealthy, there may have been no rewards in being confined to the household, quite the opposite in fact. Such women were able to take advantage of the economic development to become involved in trade as the historian Tang Lixing has shown.⁵³ Others went out to work in textile production and many of them are praised simultaneously for their virtue in doing so.⁵⁴ For many it appears as though the new climate of prosperity in which all forms of entertainment flourished was just as appealing as for the men in their family. In Chapter 12 of *Jin Ping Mei* the women emerge from their household to enjoy an evening's entertainment at the house of an acquaintance overlooking the lively Lantern Market (Figure 9).⁵⁵ From the records of the contemporary observer Zhang Dai (1597–c.1684), it seems as though this was a typical scene of the

Figure 9

An illustration entitled "The beauties make merry and admire lanterns from a balcony" from Chapter 12 of Jin Ping Mei showing the ladies of the Ximen household enjoying the lantern festival at Li Ping'er's house in Lion Street. All those in the street below are clearly enjoying the sight of the ladies in clear view on the balcony. (Reproduced by permission of the Commercial Press [Hong Kong], from Jin Ping Mei cihua)



/Qing Huizhou shehui [Merchant women and Huizhou society in the Ming and Qing], "Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Ming History" (Kyoto University, 1991), p.1.

⁵⁴ For example, see the biographies of virtuous women in *Hejian fu zhi* 河間府志 [Hejian prefecture gazetteer] (1540), *Tianyige cang Mingdai fangzhi xuankan* 天一閣藏明代方志選刊 [Selected local Ming gazetteers in the Tianyige] edn. (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1981–82), 25.5a–6a.

⁵⁵ *JPMCH*, 15.2a.

zongjiaopai zhong de nüxing" [Women involved in popular religious movements in the Ming and Qing], in *Nankai xuebao* [Nankai University journal] 5 (1982): 29–33.

⁵² Francesca Bray, *Technology and gender: fabrics of power in late imperial China* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997), p.170. See also Dorothy Ko, "Pursuing talent and virtue: education and women's culture in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China," *Late Imperial China* 13.1 (1992): 14; Ellen Widmer, "The epistolary world of female talent in seventeenth-century China," *Late Imperial China* 10.2 (1989): 16–18.

⁵³ The women of Huizhou 徽州 were famed for their involvement in trade. Tang Lixing, "Shangrenfu yu Ming /

⁵⁶ "Shaoxing dengjing" 紹興燈景 [Lantern scenes in Shaoxing], in *Tao'an mengyi*, 6.54.

⁵⁷ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the inner chambers: women and culture in seventeenth-century China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp.266–74.

⁵⁸ For gentry households see *Songchuang mengyu*, 5.122–3. For merchant households see "Bai'an Cheng weng bashi shou xu [For Mr Cheng of Bai'an on his eightieth birthday]," in *Guichuan xiansheng ji* 歸川先生集 [The collected works of Mr Guichuan] (1673), by Gui Youguang 歸有光, reprint ed., 2 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1981), 13.319.

L. Carrington Goodrich and Fang Chao-yü, eds., *Dictionary of Ming biography* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1976), 1:1006–10 (hereafter abbreviated to DMB).

⁶⁰ *Shizheng lu* 實政錄 [Records of Governance], by Lü Kun 呂坤, *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書, reprinted. (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1995), 4.88a.

⁶¹ A. W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing period* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943), p.942.

⁶² *Banqiao zaji* 板橋雜記 [Essays of Banqiao], by Yu Huai 余懷, repr. in *Lidai xiaoshuo biji xuan: Qing (yi)* [Selected historical stories and jottings: Qing, part 1] (Taipei: Shangwu Chubanshe, 1980), p.166.

⁶³ "Jifengsu" 記風俗 [A record of customs], in *Yunjian jumuchao* 雲間據目鈔 [A catalogue of unofficial writings], by Fan Lian 范廉, repr. in *Biji xiaoshuo daguan* [The extensive collection of jottings and stories] (Yangzhou: Jiangsu Guangling Guji, 1984), 2.2a.

time. He describes how women from the town of Shaoxing 紹興, Zhejiang 浙江, would walk to the liveliest spots of the town to view the lanterns, watched by all those they passed by in the street.⁵⁶

Even fully sequestered women would not have been totally isolated from the sartorial conduct of the outside world. Dorothy Ko has shown that some women of the upper classes were able to maintain their respectability whilst developing relationships with other literate women outside their immediate family. Although the majority of such associations were mainly developed through correspondence, Ko highlights two women, Xu Yuan 徐媛 and Lu Qingzi 陸卿子, both wives of late-Ming officials, who were able to form associations with courtesans whom they met in person on outings and within the inner quarters.⁵⁷ The respect shown for these courtesans in the writings of Xu Yuan and Lu Qingzi indicates that they perceived such talented women to be genteel. It is therefore quite possible that they also considered their attire to have been equally refined. Consciously or subconsciously, they may have emulated aspects of each other's clothing.

Lower class singing girls appear to have been common visitors to households, both gentry and merchant, in the flourishing economic areas of the late Ming,⁵⁸ and evidence suggests that they took advantage of such opportunities to emulate the dress of the ladies of the houses they visited. The scholar-official Lü Kun 呂坤 (1536–1618), an exemplar of Confucian probity,⁵⁹ was deeply concerned by the increasing lack of sartorial distinctions between women of ill-repute and women from genteel households:

Prostitutes are not allowed to dress the same as women from respectable households. As for those who wear figured clothing emblazoned with symbols of rank embroidered with gold and head ornaments of gold, pearls and kingfisher feathers, they will be taken to court.⁶⁰

This suggests that there were general concerns over the failure to regulate the clothing and ornamentation of prostitutes who were beginning to dress like women from the inner quarters.

However, it was probably the case that men were more concerned with the threat of their women dressing like prostitutes. Yu Huai 余懷 (1616–86), a poet and frequent visitor to the entertainment quarters during the latter years of the Ming,⁶¹ noted that:

People model themselves after the dress and ornament of the Southern entertainment quarters where plain and simple rather than fine and exquisite things are considered elegant. Even the dress of the procuresses changes with the season and is what is known as 'fashion' [*shishizhuang* 時世妝].⁶²

Another late-Ming writer Fan Lian 范廉 also remarked that it was women who were emulating the styles of dress from the entertainment quarters to the extent that those from noble families could not be distinguished.⁶³ In *Jin Ping Mei*, too, the lower class wives such as Pan Jinlian are often seen admiring the clothing of the singing girls who visit the inner quarters. In one

episode Ximen Qing promises her a set of pretty coloured clothing figured with flower patterns. The dissatisfied Jinlian replies: "I have clothes like that already. The fine yellow and silver drawnwork tussore skirt embroidered with multicoloured threads wrapped in gold foil worn by Li Guijie 李桂姐⁶⁴ is very pretty. She said it was bought in the brothel area. They all have one apart from me. I really don't know how much it would cost but I'd like you to buy me one."⁶⁵

But singing girls and courtesans were not the only visitors to the inner quarters. Other women, such as maids, relatives, tailoresses, midwives and other entertainers, were also free to come and go as they pleased. All were possible sources of information on clothing practices in the wider community.⁶⁶ This has been identified as one of the major methods Elizabethan noblewomen used to discover the latest fashions. They too led rather a restricted life at home, where display was restricted to private entertainments and visits.⁶⁷

The structure of the female side of the Chinese household may have also contributed to this flow of information. Concubines often came from a different social station to the wife; they may have been bought in from poorer families, they may have been courtesans who found favour with a patron or they may have been maids who had conceived the master's child.⁶⁸ (This is distinct from the male composition of the household, which was, for the most part, composed of men of the same social standing.) Concubines and maids would have brought their own styles of clothing and these may have mixed with those of the new house. The more women of different households and of different social statuses came into contact with each other, directly or indirectly, the more chance there was that women would be able to compare and emulate clothing and ornamentation without qualification from sumptuary regulation. Indeed, it is also possible that much emulation was of peers or even of women lower down the traditional social hierarchy.

Another factor yet to be considered in the transmission of sartorial behaviour is that of the growth of print culture in the late Ming. Publishers were taking advantage of a new and growing audience—women, particularly in the metropolitan Jiangnan 江南 region. Novels, plays, handbooks of practical advice or morality, poetry collections, all of these were either specifically published for or often ended up being consumed by women. Some was even the work of women themselves.⁶⁹ Many texts, especially literature, included detailed descriptions of female clothing and ornamentation and could have an influence upon its reader. The descriptions as found in *Jin Ping Mei* are typically intricate and meticulous examples, though it is not certain whether such a notoriously erotic novel would have found its way into the hands of any more than a handful of women.

An increase in sartorial consumption in Europe from the seventeenth century onwards has, in fact, been attributed to the concomitant expansion in publishing, particularly in the form of novels and the newly-emerging fashion journals and women's magazines all of which stimulated interest

⁶⁴ A prostitute favoured by Ximen Qing who puts in regular appearances at the Ximen household to entertain the ladies in the inner quarters.

⁶⁵ *JPMCH*, 52.1a–2a.

⁶⁶ Victoria Cass, *Dangerous women: warriors, grannies and geishas of the Ming* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), esp. pp.47–64.

⁶⁷ Breward, *The culture of fashion*, pp.60–2.

⁶⁸ Wang Shaoxi, *Xiaoqie shi* [A history of concubinage] (Shanghai: Wenyi Chubanshe, 1995), pp.38–58.

⁶⁹ Ko, *Teachers of the inner chambers*, pp.29–67.

⁷⁰ Daniel L. Purdy, *The tyranny of elegance: consumer cosmopolitanism in the era of Goethe* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp.1–50; Breward, *The culture of fashion*, p.130.

⁷¹ Clunas suspects that this may be due to the fact that moralists were always linking women to drama and fiction. See *idem*, *Pictures and visibility*, p.38.

⁷² Katherine Carlitz, "The social uses of female virtue in late Ming editions of *Lienü zhuan*," *Late Imperial China* 12.2 (1991): 117–52, esp. p.128.

in clothing and ornamentation, particularly among women.⁷⁰ Such publications had not appeared in China at this time; however, illustrated books frequently did feature detailed images of women and their clothing and such books were often associated with a female audience. The only documented owner of illustrated books during this period is, in fact, a woman.⁷¹

The illustrations in such books could have been sufficient as guides to styles of clothing and ornamentation as perceived by their illustrators, regardless of whether they were in line with sartorial regulations. Many illustrations, such as those found in *Jin Ping Mei*, are not particularly detailed in this period and are more designed to convey the action of the

narrative. However, there are some examples of more detailed prints in didactic works that are designed to elaborate a certain sartorial message, such as in the print in Figure 10 that shows the appropriate distinctions between a lady of title, a concubine and serving maids. An added complication here, though, is that such illustrations may have been recycled between genres. Katherine Carlitz has found evidence to show that didactic illustrations actually reappeared in romantic plays, and possibly vice versa, thus blurring the appropriateness of certain modes of clothing behaviour.⁷²

Yet, the majority of women in the late Ming were illiterate and, because of this, detailed knowledge of the regulations for clothing and ornamentation would have



Figure 10

Illustration from the Guifan 閨範 [see n.87 below] tale "The two faithful widows of Wei" depicting the widow and concubine of King Ling of Wei 衛靈王 (Warring States period, 475–221 BC). Both the clothing and the posture of the two women indicate their status. The widow is seated and flanked by serving girls. Her outfit of a wide-sleeved robe and belt is formal and elaborate as befits her status as a widow and head of a household. Her hair is adorned with a phoenix-style head-dress. By contrast, the concubine is depicted in more simple and informal wear. The way in which her garments appear to be blown by the wind is indicative of a more erotic role. [Guifan, reprint ed.] (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1994, 4.81a)

been limited. They would, therefore, have been dependent upon guidance from more senior or literate members of the family, visitors to the household, visual emulation through personal contact, seeing images in illustrated books or listening to descriptions of female clothing and ornamentation from literature and poetry. These forms of emulation increased the possibility of deviation from the norms and the chance that discrepancies would be perpetuated down the line. However, for women of all classes it appears as though the definition of sartorial elegance may have been much more fluid than orthodox prescriptions would suggest, being highly dependent on exposure to other models of clothing and ornamentation.

Breakdowns in Regulation and Distribution

Opportunities for adjustments to regulated styles, as exemplified by the behaviour of Wu Yueniang, could also be dramatically increased by the availability, or not, of appropriate goods in the market place or in society at large. The fact that the wife of a merchant-official is depicted in styles copied from the upper classes in defiance of sumptuary laws does suggest a failure in the regulation of clothing and ornamentation at both a government and family level.

In his assessment of the transformation of female sartorial behaviour, the late-Ming scholar Xu Xian 徐鹹 (*jinsbi* 進士 1511) apportioned blame for the continuing trend for women of the commoner class to wear pearl head-dresses:

At the start of the dynasty, women of the commoner class, on occasions of marriage and banquets, all wore enveloping robes as a form of ceremonial wear. Some were of tussore, others of fine silk, and all with an embroidered collar which hung down as a *xiapei*. I got to see this when I was young. No-one would dare to wear such items unless they were from an official family which had been the recipient of favours from the Emperor. Nowadays, when a marriage takes place in the household of a scholar, they wear pearl head-dresses, gowns and belts in order to make the event magnificent. Rich country folk borrow yellow parasols to shade their women. Chaotic excess to this extent is really laughable. Without the strict restrictions of the authorities, how can this be curbed?⁷³

Here, Xu Xian highlights a major concern of those writing such reports about the arrogation of dress and ornamentation—the fact that the authorities were not doing enough to prevent it. The later *Qingbai leichao* states that women of the commoner classes would not even be investigated in the late Ming for wearing the clothes of the ninth rank for their wedding celebrations.⁷⁴ Competition had stimulated widespread usage to the extent that it had become commonplace and officials were ridiculed for attempting to prevent it.⁷⁵

⁷³ *Xiyuanzaji* 西園雜記 [Essays from the west garden], by Xu Xian 徐鹹, reprint ed., 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985), 1.80–2.

⁷⁴ *Qingbai leichao*, 13.6198.

⁷⁵ *Kezuo zhuiyu*, 9.293.

⁷⁶ For machinery, see "Naifu" 乃服 [On clothing], in *Tiangong kaiwu* 天工開物 [Technological encyclopedia] (1637) by Song Yingxing 宋應星, repr. in Zheng Zhenduo, ed., *Zhongguo gudai banhua congkan* [Collections of Chinese ancient woodblock illustration series], 5 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1988), 1.718 and 720. For textiles, see Chen Juanjuan, "Mingdai tihua sha, luo, duan zhiwu yanjiu" [Research on Ming drawnwork, tussore and satin textiles], *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan* [Monthly bulletin of the Palace Museum] (1986-4): 79-86; id., "Mingdai tihua sha, luo, duan zhiwu yanjiu xu" [Further research on Ming drawnwork, tussore and satin textiles], *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan* (1987.2): 78-87. For colours, see "Zhangshi" 彰施 [Colour dyeing], in *Tiangong kaiwu*, 1.49-51.

⁷⁷ Craig Clunas, "The art of social climbing in sixteenth-century China," *Burlington Magazine* (June 1991): 368-75, esp. p.371.

⁷⁸ See *JPMCH*, 33.1b-2a (Huzhou), 58.1b-2a (Hangzhou), 67.3b (Huzhou and Songjiang).

⁷⁹ Approx. 2-2.5km.

⁸⁰ "Xuanhuafu fengsu kao" 宣化府風俗考 [An examination of the customs of Xuanhua prefecture], in "Zhifang" 職方 [Professions], in *Qinding gujin tusbu jicheng* 欽定古今圖書集成 [Imperial collection of books from ancient and modern times] (1726), reprint ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1934), 155.1b.

⁸¹ *Shuyuan zaji zhaichao* 菽園雜記摘抄 [A selection of essays from the Shuyuan], by Lu Rong 陸容, *Shoushan'ge congsbu* 守山閣叢書 [Shoushan'ge collection] edn., reprint ed. (Taipei: Yiwen Yinshuguan, 1968), 2.8a.

One major reason for this may have been the advances in handicraft technology during this period that provided the potential for the large-scale production of goods in an increased variety of patterns and colours for a more widespread distribution.⁷⁶ The rapidity of the developments may have taken the authorities by surprise and, hence, they took no account of the changes that permitted a less-regulated distribution of goods. It is for this reason that Clunas asserts that the failure to update sumptuary regulations was one of the factors that led to confusion and violation of the limits. The fact that less-regulated private textile enterprises could reproduce restricted designs and pass them straight on to the merchants may have also compounded this phenomenon.⁷⁷

Those involved in trade were in the perfect position to take advantage of the developments in textile production and distribution. Ximen Qing of the *Jin Ping Mei* purchases extensively from the silk regions of Nanjing 南京, Huzhou 湖州, Songjiang 松江 and Hangzhou 杭州, enabling him to open silk, satin and floss shops which line the streets of Qinghe.⁷⁸ The *Gujintusbu jicheng* 古今圖書集成 (Collection of Books from Ancient and Modern Times) reveals a similar scene in Xuanhua 宣化, Hebei 河北, and emphasises the widespread availability of a vast array of textile goods:

In the market there are rows and rows of merchant shops, each with their own name. For example, there is the Young Capital Tussore Shop, the Suzhou and Hangzhou Silk Satin Store, the Luzhou Pongee Store, the Zezhou Kerchief Store, the Linqing Cloth Store, the Floss Store, and the General Store. These business outlets from every trade extend for approximately 4-5 li⁷⁹ and all the merchants compete to live there.⁸⁰

As a trader in textiles, Ximen Qing is able to pick out particular goods for the consumption of his own household, the women of the household being the major recipients. The outfits in satin and brocade emblazoned with symbols of rank tailored for the visit of the ladies to the Qiao household are representative of this behaviour, which mirrors contemporary reports of the conduct of merchant households and reveals how such families were able to steal a march on their gentry neighbours.

Not only were restricted textiles and jewellery now available for consumption, finances permitting, luxury goods also found their way direct from the palace into the hands of the favoured. Those who had connections on the inside were considered highly privileged as the presentation of gifts, in both a public and private manner, was commonplace during this period. The late-Ming scholar Lu Rong 陸容 considered the palace to be a prime subject of envy and emulation by the people in the capital.⁸¹ Such a perception is highlighted in Chapter 14 of *Jin Ping Mei*, which sees the character Li Ping'er 李瓶兒 visiting the ladies of the Ximen household on the occasion of the birthday of the concubine Pan Jinlian. Jinlian goes to change outfits and returns with a gold *shou* character 壽字 'longevity' hairpin that Ximen has given her highly visible at the front of her hair. The pin (originally given to Ximen by Li Ping'er as

a token of her love) is passed on to Jinlian in order to buy her silence over their secret trysts:

Taking them in her hand, Jinlian saw that they were two gold openwork hairpins in the shape of the character for long life on a passionflower mount inset with azurite. Due to their extreme intricacy, you could tell that they must have been manufactured for imperial use and had come from the palace. Jinlian was absolutely delighted.⁸²

Ping'er explains to the ladies that the hairpins were brought out of the palace by her late father-in-law, the old Eunuch, and that the design cannot be found outside the palace.⁸³ No wonder Jinlian was so delighted to be presented with them.

Hair ornaments appear to have been some of the most common items to find their way out of the palace. Many of the items found in the tomb of Mme Wang 王氏 (1513–87), the wife of Li Wei 李偉 (1510–83), Marquis of Wuqing 武清侯, were gifts from their daughter, the Empress Dowager Li 李太后, mother of the Wanli emperor. Two of the hairpins excavated from the tomb sound remarkably similar to the pin from the novel. They are fashioned from turquoise, jade and gold to form the character for longevity and inset with rubies and sapphires.⁸⁴ The mother of Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525–82), the highly influential Grand Secretary,⁸⁵ was also the frequent recipient of such palace gifts. One example was a head ornament set in the form of the 'flower of everlasting spring' made of gold filigree inset with sapphires, rubies and pearls.⁸⁶

Goods that were smuggled out of the palace were an indicator of social standing. The fact that one was able to obtain such items demonstrated powerful connections related to the court and furthered aspirations to social advancement. Sources such as *Jin Ping Mei* satirise the unchecked circulation of goods to the lower classes, laying full blame upon the upper classes for their vanity and for permitting it to happen. The concern shown by Confucian officials over this arrogation of ornamentation, and clothing in general, forms a reaction to a perceived failure among officialdom at large to enforce sumptuary regulation and control the distribution of luxury goods. The delight with which Pan Jinlian in *Jin Ping Mei* displays the palace hairpins and the subsequent jealous reaction of the other women in the household may further suggest that such opportunities were viewed much more positively by those women (and their families) who were concerned with social advancement. The resulting clothing habits, though at odds with sumptuary regulation, may have been what such people perceived to be elegant sartorial behaviour, their perceptions having been conditioned by their exposure to certain modes of clothing conduct. Alternatively, it may have been the closest they could get to it, bearing in mind the availability of the various items of dress and ornamentation.

⁸² *JPMCH*, 13.11a.

⁸³ *JPMCH*, 14.11b.

⁸⁴ Zhang Xiande, Liu Jingyi and Hu Wang-huan, "Beijing shijiao Ming Wuqing hou Li Wei fufu mu qingli jianbao" [A report on the findings from the Ming tomb of Li Wei, Marquis of Wuqing, and his wife in the suburbs of Beijing], *Wenwu*, 1969.4: 54–8.

⁸⁵ *DMB*, pp.53–61.

⁸⁶ "Xieci mu shoushi dengwu shu" 謝賜母首飾等物疏 [A letter of humble thanks for the ornaments and other gifts presented to my mother], repr. in Zhang Shunhui, ed., *Zhang Juzhengji* 張居正集 [The collected works of Zhang Juzheng] (Hubei: Xinhua Shudian, 1987), 8.367.

Exemplification

⁸⁷ “Mingde Ma hou” 明德馬后 [The noble Empress Ma of the Ming], in *Guifan* [Exemplars for the inner quarters] (1590) by Lü Kun, repr. in *Zhongguo gudai banhua congkan erbian* 5 [Collected Chinese ancient woodblock prints series 2, no.5] (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1994), 3.5a–7a; “Houfei yi” 后妃一 [Empresses and consorts 1], in *Ming shi*, 113.3505–8.

⁸⁸ *DMB*, pp.1023–6.

⁸⁹ Clunas, “Regulation of consumption,” pp. 48–9; Campbell, “The sociology of consumption,” p.115.

⁹⁰ *JPMCH*, 40.8a–b and 41.1b.

The image of Wu Yueniang of *Jin Ping Mei* could be said to be representative of the competitive and extravagant face of the late sixteenth-century; however, not all women were portrayed as being as interested in social advancement through sartorial means. This period of intense social change had seen women emerging from sequestration, whether physically or in terms of having their literary writings made available to those beyond the confines of their immediate family. It was also a time that had seen reports of competitive sartorial behaviour becoming widespread among women of all social classes. Some Confucian officials felt that it was their moral duty to reverse all of these trends and began to publish works aimed at both men and women that highlighted extreme virtue. Those who wished to combat a perceived moral degeneration focused on the dissemination of images of chaste women; those who feared the consequences of talented and educated women wrote in praise of the illiterate mother; those who saw conspicuous consumption as a severe problem highlighted models of frugality as the feminine ideal.

The following is a typical example of such a woman who epitomised frugality and who had a ‘positive’ influence on those around her:

I wear coarse unrefined silks and do not eat rich foods. Those around me only wear basic cloth and there are none who adorn themselves with fragrant ornamentation.⁸⁷

The woman speaking is the Empress Ma 馬後 (1332–82), wife of the first Ming emperor Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328–98) and the excerpt is taken from the *Guifan* 閨範 biographies of women composed by Lü Kun. This biography of Empress Ma, a woman who would rather mend tattered clothes than discard them,⁸⁸ is the first entry in the section entitled “The Womanly Way” (*Furen zhi dao* 婦人之道) and such an exemplification of frugality at the highest levels was an undisguised attempt to inspire emulation in other women who were seen to be submitting to the pernicious temptations of sixteenth-century life.

A challenging task, perhaps, for it may not necessarily have been the case that the views of the author and his intended audience coincided when it came to understanding what exactly constituted extravagant clothing and ornamentation. Indeed, both Clunas and Campbell have highlighted how similar goods may hold contrasting meanings for different people.⁸⁹ It is clear that the female characters in the *Jin Ping Mei* do not consider themselves extravagant in their dress and ornamentation and it appears as if such standards were the genteel norm. Comments made by the characters themselves suggest they would be laughed at should they not be ‘properly attired’.⁹⁰ A comment by the seventeenth-century scholar Ye Mengzhu, too, highlights the excitement and pride women felt when they were able to get their hands on new items of clothing, and the embarrassment that could befall them should they fail:

Those who acquired [such clothing] did not consider themselves extravagant but splendid, and those who could not were not satisfied but shamed by the lack of it.⁹¹

Women were revelling in the new economic climate, where splendid clothing was more readily available, much to the consternation of the Confucian officials reporting their behaviour. Other sources, too, reveal female voices that show women celebrating the more liberal sartorial environment of the late Ming. However, these are usually cloaked in the conservative or reactionary discourse within which they are found.

The contemporary essayist Chen Jiru certainly lays the blame for the competitive element in opulent regions around Suzhou specifically at the feet of upper class women and suggests that ignorance may have been the reason for their behaviour:

As for the tall chignons, fine silks and linens, the dazzling adornments and resplendent dress, these do not come from impoverished, but from hereditary houses which compete with each other. Indeed, these things do not originate with the officials who are regulated, but with the *ignorant women* who know nothing.⁹²

The contemporary example of Mme Zhou 'Lady of Nurture' 周孺人, the wife of Yu Jifu 俞輯甫, hints that this 'ignorance' may have existed. She came from an eminent family being the daughter of Kang Fengming 康鳳鳴, Left Assistant Minister at the Court of Judicial Review, and Mme Gu 'Lady of Suitability' 顧宜人. She was so talented her father is reported to have said that he would be satisfied if he were to bear a son like her. It is said that when young she secretly desired the brocades and fine silks bought to the house by merchants. However, her father knew of her feelings and said to her mother: "If our son-in-law is poor, our daughter will have to wear hairpins of thorn and skirts of linen. She will have no use for such things as these." On hearing this, she was so ashamed that from then on she refused to wear anything colourful or attractive.⁹³ Although the male literati author stresses the victory of Confucian values over extravagant desires, the voice of the daughter in the text reveals an excitement and passion for clothing and ornamentation stifled by fatherly intervention.

In the wider society it was the officials who came in for indirect criticism for failing to lead women down the path to economy and moderation. Lü Kun goes further to suggest that there was no-one at all to do this as it was the men in the family (those who were supposed to do the leading) who acquiesced to their every whim, taking much delight from the results.⁹⁴ Thus, in an attempt to counter the current trends and set an example to the populace, contemporary observers composed biographies of more notable women in society, who epitomised both nobility and frugality, just like the example from the *Guifan* biography of the virtuous Empress Ma.

This was a period in which there were intense discussions on issues such as the growing cult of widow chastity, increasing female literacy

⁹¹ "Neizhuang," in *Yueshi bian*, 8.178.

⁹² "Shou Fan mu Feng yiren qishi xu" 壽范母馮宜人七十綬 [Celebrating the seventieth birthday of Fan's mother, Mme Feng, a 'lady of suitability'], in *Wanxiangtang*, 16.291. Emphasis my own. See also "Fengsu zhi" 風俗志 [A record of customs], in *Shaoxing fu zhi* 紹興府志 [Shaoxing prefecture gazetteer] (1587), reprint ed. (Taipei: Chengwen Chubanshe, 1983), 12.3a.

⁹³ "Yu Jifu qi zhuan" 俞輯甫妻傳 [The tale of Yu Jifu's wife], *Zhenchuan xiansheng ji* 震川先生集 [The collected works of Mr Zhenchuan] (1673), by Gui Youguang 歸有光, reprint ed. (Taipei: Yuanliu Chubanshe, 1983), 27.448.

⁹⁴ "Han shi jiafa" 韓氏家法 [The domestic regulations of the Han family], in *Guifan*, 3.87b.

⁹⁵ Mark Elvin, "Female virtue and the state in China," *Past and Present* 104 (1984): 111–52; Carlitz, "The social uses of female virtue," pp.117–52; id., "Desire, danger and the body: stories of women's virtue in late Ming China," in *Engendering China: women, culture and the state*, ed. Christina Gilmartin, Gail Herschatter, Lisa Rofel and Tyrene White/

and female roles in general.⁹⁵ In her study of the work of Lü Kun, Joanna Handlin has shown how such writings should be "interpreted as reactions to the aggressive behavior of women, as described in the vernacular fiction, and to the expansion of opportunities for women living in cities."⁹⁶ Although such writings do not necessarily relate the social realities of the time but form an idealised reaction to the changes in society, texts such as the *Guifan* that were specifically aimed at women, literate or not,

cannot fail to have affected how women were perceived and how some women perceived themselves.

It would have been educated upper-class women who were more likely to be positively influenced by didactic works. In a similar way to sequestration, the rewards from such self-inflicted economy in clothing and ornamentation could be considerable for them. However, the fact that they had seen, heard or read that their usual attire had been usurped by common merchant women may better explain why some gentry women may have felt the need to renounce the cultural and social power of their appointed attire to find less ostentatious dress more appealing. Whether this was a widespread phenomenon is unclear, but the fact that the only texts referring to such clothing behaviour are all highly didactic in nature would suggest that it was quite limited.

Indeed, when looking at the composition of texts and other materials, it does seem most probable that the ideology,

Figure 11

In this authoritative bust-length portrait of the Empress Ma (artist unknown), the subject is sporting an imperial yellow tongxiu robe embroidered with the phoenix emblem in accordance with her status. Her relatively simple hair ornamentation also includes a phoenix pin. (From *Masterpieces of Chinese Portrait Painting in the National Palace Museum* [Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1973], figure 39)



/(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp.101–24; id., "The daughter, the singing girl and the seduction of suicide," in *Passionate women: female suicide in late imperial China*, ed. Paul S. Ropp, Paola Zamperini and Harriet T. Zurndorfer (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp.22–46.

⁹⁶ Joanna F. Handlin, "Lü Kun's new audience: the influence of women's literacy on sixteenth-century thought," in *Women in Chinese society*, ed. Margery Wolf and Roxanne Witke (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1978), pp.13–38, esp. pp.13–16.

and not the reality, was more significant. A contrasting image of the Empress Ma as manifested in an imperial portrait (Figure 11) demonstrates that it would be only be proper for her to be portrayed in clothing that adhered to sartorial dictates, regardless of whether or not this was her customary garb. Portraits such as this (and the ones examined earlier) were intended to promote the authority and legitimacy of the household, whether imperial or otherwise.⁹⁷ An image of an empress devoid of any symbols of rank would be useless to this end and even the illustration accompanying the *Guifan* biography of Empress Ma depicts her in an elaborate head-dress (Figure 12). Whether luxurious or frugal, the messages such images of extreme female clothing behaviour provided were more important than historical accuracy. However, messages do reveal contradictions in the perception of refined clothing and ornamentation.

Illusions of Grandeur

There is a clear picture of clothing adopted by those who aimed at upward mobility, namely, the clothing of the higher ranks to which they aspired. Items emblazoned with symbols of status, decorated belts, ornamented head-dresses and other restricted items are reported to have been usurped and suggest that the sumptuary laws were widely flouted with impunity. Women from all social strata are reported to have been participants in these trends. With their clothing and ornamentation being adopted by those lower down the social scale, some women of the élite altered their attire, whether in the direction of luxury or simplicity, to increase the disparity between themselves and the upwardly-mobile. Yet, criticism and mockery was most often directed towards women from mercantile families in order to create a more dramatic contrast with élite models of grandeur, whether the splendour of ancestral portraiture or the frugality found in didactic writings.

Figure 12

Although the Empress Ma is clothed in relatively simple and undecorated attire in this illustration from the Guifan tale "The Noble Empress Ma of the Ming," she is still wearing her elaborate phoenix head-dress. (Repr. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1994, 3.5a)



⁹⁷ Richard Vinograd, *Boundaries of the self: Chinese portraits, 1600-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.13.

⁹⁸ Patrizia Calefato, "Fashion and worldliness: language and imagery of the clothed body," *Fashion Theory* 1.1 (1997): 69–90, esp. pp.69–70.

However, due to the very nature of emulation and the more personal meanings attached to dress and ornamentation, it is also possible that women themselves were redefining the very concept of elegant attire. Visual emulation, whether through physical contact or through exposure to written and visual materials, provided windows on other worlds. Increasing contact between women of different households and different classes would have enhanced knowledge of varying clothing practices. The availability of items in the market place or through gift presentation would certainly have influenced or limited attempts at emulation and, subsequently, imitations of other forms of attire may have altered as a consequence. The resulting outfits adopted by women, whether they were traditional gentry class or aspiring lower class, did not necessarily equate with prescribed norms of socially superior attire.

In her study of the language and imagery of clothing, Patrizia Calefato argues that:

In every society and culture dress is a form of projection, of simulation, of the world valid for both society and for the individual, expressing itself in signs and objects through which the human body is placed, temporally and spatially, in its surroundings.⁹⁸

And it is apparent that women in late-Ming China negotiated the sartorial boundaries set by society in response to their changing environment; hence, the concept of sartorial grandeur was highly subjective. Didactic and prescriptive sources from the period reveal aspects of female conduct for guidance and edification, but are often more idealistic than realistic; other sources such as fictional texts, gazetteers, essays and even the archaeological record reveal contrasts and contradictions in the way the late Ming world was perceived. The two images of female dress and ornamentation—a fictional depiction of a merchant woman in upper class attire contrasted with a didactic depiction of an empress in clothing more associated with the commoner class—examined in this paper clearly demonstrate the complex and shifting understandings of clothing and ornamentation as markers of social status.

Sarah Dauncey

Centre for Chinese
Studies School of East
Asian Studies University
of Sheffield Arts Tower, Western Bank
Sheffield S10 2TN United Kingdom
S.Dauncey@sheffield.ac.uk