



# Research on the Evolution and Development of Women's Fashion Styles in the Song Dynasty

Fangling Shen, Shaojia Jing\*

College of Light Industry and Textiles, Inner Mongolia University of Technology, Hohhot 010051, Inner Mongolia, China.

**How to cite this paper:** Fangling Shen, Shaojia Jing. (2025) Research on the Evolution and Development of Women's Fashion Styles in the Song Dynasty. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 9(5), 911-917.

DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2025.05.008

**Received:** March 31, 2025

**Accepted:** April 30, 2025

**Published:** May 30, 2025

\*Corresponding author: Shaojia Jing, College of Light Industry and Textiles, Inner Mongolia University of Technology, Hohhot 010051, Inner Mongolia, China.

## Abstract

As the culmination of traditional Chinese classical aesthetics, the Song Dynasty established a distinctive aesthetic system profoundly shaped by its economic prosperity and cultural flourishing. The deep interplay between philosophical thought, cultural arts, and aesthetic principles during this period exerted transformative influences on women's clothing styles and aesthetic orientations, catalyzing a paradigm shift from the Tang Dynasty's "voluptuous opulence" to the Song's "austere elegance". This paradigmatic transformation not only marked a pivotal chapter in the history of Chinese costume development by establishing a transitional thread bridging the Tang and Yuan dynasties, but also provides a crucial lens through which to examine the evolution of Chinese sartorial culture. Focusing on women's attire throughout the Northern and Southern Song periods, this study systematically investigates its stylistic features, layering techniques, color coordination, and decorative craftsmanship across historical phases. By tracing its developmental trajectory and analyzing its unique aesthetic characteristics, the research offers novel interpretive pathways for comprehending the cultural ethos of Song society.

## Keywords

Chinese women's clothing; Song Dynasty women's clothing; Song Dynasty costume culture; clothing styles; clothing combinations

## 1. Introduction

The Song Dynasty was a period in ancient Chinese history marked by a thriving economy and rich culture. Both the literati and commoners possessed the material and spiritual resources to pursue and appreciate beauty, placing high value on education and emphasizing inner cultural refinement. This led to a preference for subtle and meaningful beauty, which is evident in the distinctive elegance, simplicity, refinement, and subtlety of Song-dynasty women's clothing. Simultaneously, the Song Dynasty actively or passively engaged in close interactions with neighboring ethnic minority regimes. This interaction, which objectively facilitated the spread of culture and also fostered the reciprocal impact of dress designs. The utilitarian characteristics of peripheral ethnic minority garments were assimilated into the attire worn by women throughout the Song Dynasty.

## 2. The "wide" and "narrow" styles in women's clothing

During the Song Dynasty, there was a gradual transformation in women's clothing, transitioning from a design characterized by grace and elegance to one that accentuated a slender and svelte physique, reflecting their aspiration for slim figures.

In the early Northern Song Dynasty, women's dress maintained the same style as a consistent style reminiscent of the late Tang and Five Dynasties period, characterized by a "wide and loose" appearance. An illustration of a female

figure wearing wide-sleeved clothes with a length that reaches the ground can be observed in the mural painting of Tangzhuang in Dengfeng, Henan, during the Northern Song Dynasty. This style originated from the Southern Tang but remained popular among the noble class in the Northern Song Dynasty.

During the later period of the Northern Song Dynasty, there was a progressive reduction in the size of sleeves and body in women's apparel, resulting in improved practicality and suitability (Jin, 2020). The Song Dynasty was encompassed by numerous formidable ethnic minority regimes, necessitating the unavoidable occurrence of exchange and integration between different ethnic groups. The clothing style of the hundred surnames of the Song Dynasty, which resided along the border areas, saw subtle changes due to active or passive interactions with adjacent ethnic minorities in politics, economy, folk trade, and other aspects. Despite the prohibition imposed by the ruling elite of the Song Dynasty on the general public's adoption and imitation of ethnic minority clothing designs, the practicality and convenience of such attire greatly appealed to the vast laboring populace during that era. For example, in the middle and later periods of the Song Dynasty, the Beizi (Figure 1), a traditional Chinese style long top with a straight collar and a slit under the armpit, transformed into a garment worn by individuals of both genders and was widely embraced across all social classes. The style of the garment incorporated and displayed the features of snug and slender sleeves and side slits inspired by nomadic attire to facilitate movement, rendering it both visually appealing and practical for individual use (Zhang, 2010). This style gained extensive popularity, influencing people from various social strata and emerging as one of the most emblematic fashion trends of the Song Dynasty. During this age, skirts also had a visually slimming effect. The antiquated skirts from preceding dynasties gradually waned, giving rise to more intricate skirt-like garments crafted from abundant fabric, leading to styles like "hundred pleats" and "thousand pleats". The delicate pleating created an illusion of slimness for the women's lower body.

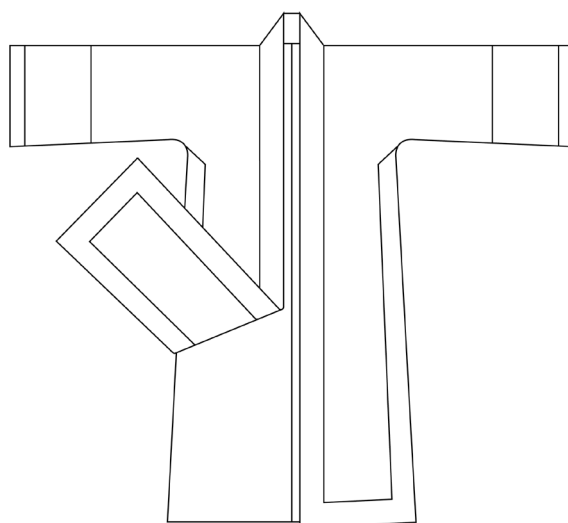


Figure 1. Beizi. Source: Illustrated by the author.

In the Southern Song Dynasty, women's clothes began to have the distinctively slender and elongated silhouette, of women's clothing became even more pronounced. Numerous poems exemplify the prevailing fashion of women's clothing, emphasizing slimness in lines such as "embracing the gentle chill in a slim-delicate spring attire" and "the tight-fitting garment accentuates the petite waist". The sleeves of women's clothing also gradually decreased in volume, eventually featuring a tightly fitted forearm sleeve type reminiscent of the popular lamb leg sleeves during the Western Romantic era.

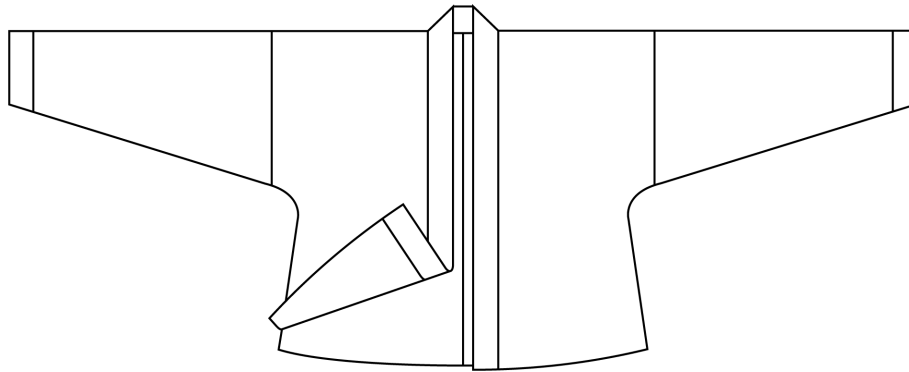
During the Song Dynasty, there was a noticeable shift in the materials used for women's clothes, transitioning from a wider style to a narrower one. During the early Northern Song Dynasty, women's apparel was characterized by the use of robust and substantial textiles, including jacquard fabric and woven brocade. Nevertheless, as women's fashion trends progressively shifted towards slimmer and longer clothes, they also began utilizing lighter and thinner materials, such as leno, silk gauze, and plain woven silk.

### 3. The positioning of "frugality" and "abundance" in the hierarchy of women's clothing

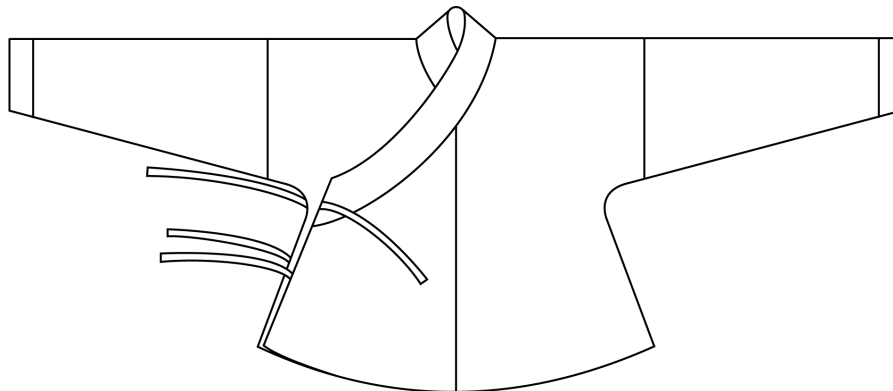
The evolution of women's attire throughout the Song Dynasty was distinguished by a notable augmentation in the

complexity of layers, gradually establishing the hallmark of multi-layered garments.

The style of women's clothing in the early Song Dynasty perpetuated sartorial traditions from preceding dynasties, characterized by upper garments such as a traditional Chinese style shirt or jacket named Shan (Figure 2), or a quintessential open cross-collar top named Ru (Figure 3), sometimes the lined clothe named Ao, and other garments comprising the upper part of the outfit, while lower-body garments predominantly utilized the single-panel wrapped long skirt. The sartorial aesthetic exhibited relative simplicity in cut and construction, eschewing excessive layering. Commoner women predominantly adopted narrow-sleeved Ru or Shan ensembles that prioritized utilitarian functionality and wearability. Throughout the dynastic period, however, Song women's attire progressively evolved in sartorial complexity, manifesting through stratified layering techniques.



**Figure 2. Straight Collar Short Shan (Source: Illustrated by the author).**



**Figure 3. Ru (Source: Illustrated by the author).**

During the later years of the Northern Song Dynasty, it became fashionable for women to wear short Shan held in place by long Beizi. In the mid to late Northern Song Dynasty, the trend of donning a short Shan beneath a long Beizi gained widespread popularity, as evidenced by the statue of a maid in the Hall of the Holy Mother in Jinci Temple (Figure 4), who sported a long Beizi layered over a short Shan. The length exhibited irregularity yet was skillfully organized, resulting in a dynamic and captivating composition. The design of this short Shan is characterized by a minimalist style, which creates a visual contrast with the embellished long Beizi, not only making the outfit more layered but also enhancing the overall texture of the design. The maid's lower garments exhibited a sophisticated layering effect: the innermost layer consisted of wide-legged trousers that extended to the ground and flared out, while the outer layer comprised a long skirt that wrapped around from behind to the front, with its hem slightly overlapping in front. While walking or standing, the lengthy robe and skirt gracefully drape down to the floor, creating a trailing effect that resembles the layers of a blossoming flower. The skirt also exposed a brief apron that extended below the knee, suggesting that women in this era continued to adhere to the custom of wearing open-crotch trousers, with the short apron serving to cover the crotch area. This dressing style revolutionized the traditional "lower garment-over-upper" that had been prevalent since the Northern Dynasties. It enhanced the complexity and hierarchical variations of traditional Han women's attire, and also exerted a substantial influence on the subsequent fashion choices of women, gradually transitioning towards a trend of "upper garment-over-lower".



Figure 4. Song Sculpture Maid of Jinci Temple (Source: <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20210215A00UW100>).

#### 4. The distinction between the “interior” and “exterior” of women’s clothing

During the Song Dynasty, a fashion trend emerged where undergarments were worn as outerwear. Traditional Han ethnic undergarments such as camisoles and pants transitioned into visible outerwear, blurring the distinction between undergarments and outerwear. This stylistic shift contributed to greater diversity and sophistication in women’s clothing in terms of layering and styles.

Prior to the Song Dynasty, camisoles were primarily used as undergarments, concealed beneath Shan and Ru. However, during the Song Dynasty, the camisole gradually rose in the hierarchy of attire. Additionally, advancements in the textile industry led to exquisitely designed and crafted undergarments, eventually making them suitable for external wear. During that era, it was common for women to wear a camisole on their upper body, paired with a Beizi that had no buttons, allowing the front flaps to naturally hang down and partially expose the camisole as they moved. For instance, in artworks and stone carvings dating back to the Song Dynasty, depictions of women can be observed wearing camisoles with straight necklines that are visible from the neckline of their outer attire. During the mid Northern Song Dynasty, a clothing matching style emerged where round-collared inner garments were worn beneath Shan with narrow sleeves and a straight collar. The distinct contrast between the round neck of the undergarment and the straight collar of the outer garment contributed to the style’s increasing popularity in the later part of the Song Dynasty. In fact, during the Southern Song Dynasty, there was a brief emergence of low-necked clothing, as depicted in paintings such as *Mingyuan Dushi*. In the painting, a commoner woman is portrayed going shopping while wearing a Shan with a straight collar and narrow sleeves, which are open to reveal a camisole that barely covers half of her chest.

Before the Song Dynasty, traditional Han attire was subject to strict feudal regulations that led to the prevalent practice of wearing trousers beneath skirts. However, during the Song Dynasty, Han women’s trousers had become visible beneath their skirts or even adopted the pairing of upper garments with trousers (Tan, 2014). This fashion trend was predominantly embraced by women from the middle and lower socioeconomic classes as it catered to their practical labor requirements through its simplistic design featuring short upper garments paired with trousers. The brick sculptures found in the tomb of the Northern Song Dynasty in Jiuliugou, Yanshi, Henan province, portray a woman engaged in the act of grooming her hair. The ensemble comprising her straight-collar Shan, trousers, and skirt is emblematic of the traditional attire that women wore by females during this historical period. Additionally, a new style of women’s trousers known as Diaodun has emerged. It resembles the legs of trousers and is secured with straps at the knees and ankles. A silk-based painting from the Song Dynasty, titled *Zaju Characters*, depicts a woman wearing Diaodun. She is featured in a short shirt with a straight collar and narrow sleeves, paired with long pants and the Diaodun. Despite being considered contrary to traditional Han clothing etiquette, which prioritized upper garments over lower ones, Diaodun gained popularity but was subsequently prohibited by rulers as “demonic clothing”.

However, its practicality and convenience made it difficult for laboring populace individuals who required daily functionality to abandon it. As a result, the traditional clothing etiquette had to yield to practicality.

During the Southern Song Dynasty, trousers became prevalent and had a significant impact on both the general populace and the upper echelons of society. In a painting called *Zhongxing Ruiying* from this era, a noblewoman is portrayed attired in a Beizi and long trousers with slits on both sides, surrounded by a crowd. Additionally, in the burial attire of Huang Sheng, a noblewoman from the same dynasty, a variation of trousers with an open crotch was introduced. This style complemented the existing closed-crotch trousers with side slits, creating harmonious coordination and enhancing decorative effects. It is evident that throughout this period, trousers had evolved to serve not only practical purposes but also as embellishments for aesthetic enhancement.

## 5. The “intensity” and “subtlety” of colour in women’s clothing

There was a gradual transition in the colour palette of women’s clothing during the Song Dynasty from vibrant and bold shades to more delicate and refined hues. This transformation was not solely shaped by the artistic principles and societal fashions prevalent throughout that era, but also intricately linked to advancements in dyeing techniques and the societal preference for particular materials and textures in clothing at that time (Zhang, 2023).

In the early to middle period of the Northern Song Dynasty, despite the rulers’ advocacy for frugality, women’s clothing continued to exhibit the vibrant colour that had been popular since the Tang Dynasty, including red, purple, cyan, and green. In particular, skirts, like the iconic pomegranate skirts, were often more intensely coloured than tops, showcasing a rich and vibrant aesthetic. The overall colour palette remained consistent, reflecting a profound sense of richness and depth.

With the development of dyeing techniques and the evolution of aesthetic concepts during the Song Dynasty, the colour of women’s clothing gradually shifted towards a more elegant and subdued palette. This change was reflected not only in the brightness of the colour but also in their purity and saturation, with a rise in popularity of more intricate and sophisticated shades of gray. The depictions of “a blue Shan with an apricot-yellow skirt” and “a white Ru with a green skirt” in the poem exemplify typical attire for women during the Song Dynasty. These colour, elegant and gentle, effectively showcased the softness and restraint of women, echoing the natural and fresh aesthetic style of Song Dynasty paintings. In the Southern Song period, women’s clothing colour became even more refined and light. This can be seen in the renowned female poet Zhu Shuzhen’s verse “a light red Shan revealing the skin”, which vividly depicts the delicacy and thinness of women’s clothing, allowing the skin to show through. Additionally, light green, beige, and goose-yellow were favored colours among Southern Song women, giving a sense of ethereal beauty akin to “a lotus emerging from the water” (Yu, 2023).

The advancement of dyeing technology during the Song Dynasty offered technical assistance in enhancing the variety of colours in women’s garments. The dyeing process of the high-end gray series was intricate, involving the use of delicate and elusive hues, thereby augmenting its appeal. This dyeing procedure enhances the delicacy and softness of the colour in women’s apparel. The choice of materials for women’s clothing throughout the Song Dynasty influenced colour expression. Materials such as cotton and linen are appropriate for dyeing clothes with vibrant hues, while lightweight and delicate textiles like silk gauze and leno are more suited for creating garments with muted tones.

## 6. The “simplicity” and “complexity” in the adornment of women’s clothing

The adornment of women throughout the Song Dynasty experienced a notable transformation, evolving from the simplicity characteristic of the early Northern Song Dynasty to the opulent extravagance prevalent in the Southern Song Dynasty.

At the beginning of the Northern Song Dynasty, following a tumultuous period of warfare that had left society weakened and vulnerable, Song Taizu, Zhao Kuangyin, staunchly opposed extravagant customs and mandated frugality among the populace, aiming to revitalize their livelihoods. During this era, women’s attire was characterized by plain and simple styles, with fashion tending towards conservatism. The style of accessories was predominantly simple and tasteful, eschewing overly complex decorative craftsmanship and extravagant materials.

In the later period of the Northern Song Dynasty, as the economy flourished, the materials, craftsmanship, and designs of clothing became increasingly diverse and intricate. The more stable society and improved living conditions provided a conducive environment for people to pursue more splendid attire, leading to a shift in women’s fashion trends. During this era, the phrase “the markets are filled with pearls and jewels, while the households overflow with

exquisite silk fabrics, all competing in grandeur and extravagance” encapsulated the shared image of bustling cities. The ruling class also gradually eased restrictions on women’s use of decorative items, allowing a variety of precious accessories to gain popularity. Decorative patterns on fabrics saw greater innovation compared to those of the Tang Dynasty. Concurrently, the lifelike flower-and-bird paintings of the Song Dynasty reached an unprecedented level of development, exerting a profound influence on clothing patterns that favored a detailed and realistic style imbued with rich ornamental significance. The colour combinations in fabric printing and dyeing often utilized a range of intermediate hues, resulting in an overall style of clothing that was serene and harmonious. Shen Congwen highly praised the Song Dynasty’s brocades in his writings, considering their “vivid portrayal of decorative motif of plucked flower and branch, which transcended the rigid symmetry of Tang Dynasty patterns” (Sun & Zhang, 2023).

During the Southern Song Dynasty, the turmoil caused by the southward relocation, coupled with a diminished central authority and the burgeoning commodity economy, drove women’s fashion towards increasing complexity and opulence. The aristocracy, in pursuit of pleasure, sought innovation and luxury in their attire, extensively utilizing precious materials such as gold, silver, pearls, and jewels. Techniques like mud-gold painting and gold leaf application made the garments more splendid, and the art of gold decoration experienced substantial advancement (Qing, 2021). The burial artifacts unearthed from the tombs of noblewomen, such as gold-stamped floral robes, golden armlets, and pearl ornaments, and even everyday items embellished with gold, silver, and jade, authentically reflected the extravagant lifestyle of the era. As the tide of luxury grew unchecked, it became increasingly challenging to exercise control. The phenomenon of fashionable luxury often proliferates rapidly, prompting lower common classes to emulate the upper echelons by seeking exquisite garments. Regardless of a family’s financial status, “all pursue gorgeous silk fabrics”. Zhang Zhongwen described this phenomenon in his book, *Baitasui*: “Many individuals in the capital easily fall into poverty...adorned themselves with gold and silver hairpins and bracelets” (Zhang, 2018).

## 7. Conclusion

The evolution and development of women’s clothing styles during the Song Dynasty serve as a reflection of advancements in the social economy, cultural and artistic prosperity, and shifts in aesthetic values, alongside their integration with surrounding ethnic minorities, thereby culminating in a distinctive clothing art style. Transitioning from the simplicity of earlier periods to the opulence of later ones, women’s clothing underwent continuous innovation in styles and embellishments, significantly enriching the wardrobes of ancient Chinese women. These exquisite garments have also become crucial tangible evidence for examining the social economy, society, aesthetic notions, and other facets of the Song Dynasty. Simultaneously, the progression and transformation of women’s clothing styles throughout the Song Dynasty played a pivotal role in the continuation and innovation of traditional clothing styles in subsequent periods.

## Funding

This paper is supported by the 2025 Postgraduate Education and Teaching Reform Project of Inner Mongolia University of Technology: Research and Practice on Ideological and Political Education in the Course of “Decorative Colour” under the Background of “Creative Transformation and Innovative Development” of China’s Excellent Traditional Culture (Project No.: YJGS202501).

## References

- Jin, W. (2020). Research on the costume modeling of female in Song Dynasty [Master’s thesis]. Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, China. <https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.26932/d.cnki.gbjfc.2020.000084>
- Qing, Y. (2021). The analysis and cultural connotation of Beizi in Song Dynasty [Master’s thesis]. Jiangnan University, China. <https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.27169/d.cnki.gwqgu.2021.000880>
- Sun, M., & Zhang, K. (2023). On the application of “raw color flower” in Song Dynasty costumes. *Fashion China*, (12), 32-37. <https://doi.org/10.20100/j.cnki.cn11-4548/ts.2023.12.008>
- Tan, R. (2014). Styles and fabrics of trousers in the images of the Song Dynasty. *Advanced Materials Research*, 1048, 236-239.
- Yu, W. (2023). The beauty of elegant charm in the costumes of the Song Dynasty. *West Leather*, 45(13), 147-149.

<https://doi.org/10.20143/j.1671-1602.2023.13.048>

- Zhang, B. (2010). The study of Han Chinese clothing in the Song Dynasty [Doctoral dissertation]. Suzhou University, China. [https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=IP3-TJYmrEswBwVMUcOBGhrtXuSGBrpeJydoJcNTsiXQ41FqEVtsz2i-ChYYZHRxVAISF6TxroI4E2xI22jUH\\_FyeM5p8d7US\\_57pc7g2yNOMFrDiVH6Gs93BcDSUmFqmw4reI--SbupZEInishnAlzBwTo9e-Bb2IpYJ9JcgIVa9sH4gIDkOUxmn8YK-ODB&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS](https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=IP3-TJYmrEswBwVMUcOBGhrtXuSGBrpeJydoJcNTsiXQ41FqEVtsz2i-ChYYZHRxVAISF6TxroI4E2xI22jUH_FyeM5p8d7US_57pc7g2yNOMFrDiVH6Gs93BcDSUmFqmw4reI--SbupZEInishnAlzBwTo9e-Bb2IpYJ9JcgIVa9sH4gIDkOUxmn8YK-ODB&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS)
- Zhang, L. (2018). A study on the structure and shape of women's clothing in the Southern Song Dynasty [Doctoral dissertation]. Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, China. <https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.26932/d.cnki.gbjfc.2018.000005>
- Zhang, Y. (2023). Analysis of the development of traditional Chinese culture: A case study of the highly prosperous Song Dynasty culture. *International Journal of Frontiers in Sociology*, 5(10), 21-25.