

Study on the Evolution of Global Clothing from Ancient Times to the Modern Era

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 15 Jul 2025; Received in revised form: 11 Aug 2025; Accepted: 15 Aug 2025; Available online: 25 Aug 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords—clothing, ideological, style, fabric, beauty, practicality</p>	<p><i>Through a comparative study of four countries during two key periods, this study reveals that clothing culture exhibited regular patterns, with each period, demonstrating distinct characteristics associated with specific countries or historical eras, such as the Song Dynasty, Ming Dynasty, the Renaissance period, and the Byzantine Empire. Focus this rule on the contemporary era, analyzing the changes in the clothing of the United States and South Korea under the influence of modern times and this historical logic.</i></p>

INTRODUCTION

Clothing serves as a reflection of social hierarchy, level of technological development, and the cultural aesthetic trends of a given period. This study focuses on two periods in history, employing a vivid contrast between the strengths and weaknesses of clothing styles so as to uncover unique material perspectives that reveal the underlying cultural narratives.

1. Take the Song Dynasty and the Renaissance as examples

1.1. Research background

Over the course of this century, through various ideological revolutions and liberation movements, American society has cultivated a more stable and open-minded mindset, marking a significant departure from previous eras. As the world's leading superpower with unparalleled comprehensive strength, the United States has demonstrated remarkable progress in fostering inclusive, particularly in areas of gender equality and aesthetic diversity. This cultural evolution is evident in the

widespread acceptance of diverse gender identities and the celebration of varied aesthetic expressions across different social strata.

The Song Dynasty boasted global economic dominance, with its prosperous economy and overseas trade fostering a relatively liberal fashion culture (marked by the prevalence of Hu-style clothing). Despite the rise of Neo-Confucianism advocating frugality and elegance, extravagant brocade garments and novel Hu-style attire remained common symbols of wealth and intellectual sophistication. Although numerous official prohibitions were issued, such ostentatious displays persisted. Song Dynasty attire thus embodied a paradoxical blend of luxury-seeking and refined elegance.

The special cultural background and social development made the Song Dynasty and the Renaissance show more vitality and openness than other dynasties in the period of the same terms of ideology and economy. The vitality and Renaissance

of the Song Dynasty emphasized the prosperity and warmth of humanistic under the ritual system, all of which demonstrated their resistance to feudalism and religious oppression, the resistance is more deeply reflected in the United States today.

1.2. Style, fabric and color

The Renaissance period witnessed a shift in fashion trends, as people began to adopt new styles in clothing combinations, with women adorning themselves with various types of jewelry. Wool and linen remained the primary fabrics, and the use of intricate patterns conveyed vibrant and expressive ideas. Alongside the popularity of the "body lines" influenced by the concept of "freedom", anti-religious sentiments grew stronger, reflecting a growing tendency among people to break free from religious constraints.

Song Dynasty garments emphasized simple and understated colors, reflecting a Confucian elegance. Although whole society advocates elegance and simplicity, and there is still various people using luxurious pearls and brocade clothes to show their financial resources, even ordinary people will use velvet and willow branches to create a golden scene all over the street. Yet even in an era that celebrated refined simplicity, some flaunted their wealth through lavish brocade and crimson garments. Commoners similarly adorned themselves with silk flowers and willow branches to create vibrant displays of jewelry and silk throughout the streets. While constrained by ritual codes that forbade luxurious fabrics and colors, ordinary people broke through plainness with "Yi Nian Jing" (annual landscape) patterns and defied color taboos through specialized dyeing techniques. The unstoppable fashion wave that defied the prohibition on extravagance further demonstrated the Song Dynasty's openness and vitality under feudal etiquette.

In the United States, fashion has broken free from color symbolism, with colors undergoing redefinition and shifting meanings. Pink has been revitalized as a feminine symbol, while the rise of neutral tones marks the dawn of gender-neutrality. Technology-driven color equality has shattered class barriers associated with "high-end exclusive hues." In textile innovation, stretchable functional fabrics enhance size inclusive, reflecting peoples growing emphasis on personal experience and asserting bodily autonomy.

1.3. Beauty and practicality

Technology is the material basis for the practicality coexist with aesthetics. The influence of the "freedom" ideological meant that most clothing reflected the beauty of body lines, and the public's preference became the dominant style during the Renaissance period. To cope with climate change, it evolved into "layered" dressing, which was very popular at that time and met people's needs for convenience. The working class adopted functional and simplified designs, such as wide-leg pants and leather aprons and gold thread embroidery, the women's skirts greatly enhanced aesthetics. Trade prosperity enhanced clothing technology and the quality of raw materials, which was advocated in the Renaissance periods.

Song Dynasty attire emphasized practicality and functionality, maintaining ceremonial propriety while ensuring convenience for daily activities. The widely popular bazi (a traditional undergarment) exemplified this philosophy. Functionally, its arched underarm design facilitated labor while adapting to seasonal conditions. Aesthetically, its silhouette aligned with court etiquette norms, showcasing refined elegance. While the imperial family wore bazi during festive occasions, commoners maintained their garments visual appeal. Although they can't use expensive fabrics and colors because of the ritual bondage, they broke through the simple and elegant restriction with the pattern of "one year scenery" and broke through the color ban with a specific dyeing process. Through these everyday choices, Song citizens practiced a subtle form of rebellion through their clothing choices.

At present, American fashion is challenging the traditional elite aesthetic by shifting away from an exclusive emphasis on formal wear toward more casual and comfortable attire. This new approach, emblematic of the fashion ethos of the new century, counters the ceremonial prestige associated with European luxury brands by prioritizing functionality and comfort. The trend of seamlessly blending styles across multiple scenarios—such as from the workplace to the gym—demonstrates the dynamic evolution of contemporary fashion.

1.4. Commonalities and extensions

Both Song Dynasty and Renaissance clothing embodied resistance against feudalism and religious constraints, reflecting intellectual openness and vitality. The comfort and diversity of these garments mirrored overt or subtle forms of defiance. This rebellious spirit finds deeper resonance in contemporary America: jeans, ripped jeans, and bell-bottoms challenge elite aesthetics; the popularity of miniskirts echoes women's liberation, while Victoria's Secrets declining sales reflect criticism of traditional body standards, demonstrating the prevalence of diverse aesthetic preferences. The rise of street culture and hip-hop trends deepened racial emancipation, while the global spread of American "minimalist style" alleviated societal anxiety about body dimensions.

2. Taking the Ming Dynasty and the Roman period as examples

2.1. Research background

The period of Eastern Rome, which is influenced by Christianity, combined church with imperial power, noble costumes show their identity and status. When the empire split, economy decreased, which is influenced by Islamic style, costumes are more simple. People are controlled by imperial power and divine power.

Because of the influenced by Chen Zhu's Neo-Confucianism in the Ming Dynasty, the clothing style were very simple, and the rules were very concerned about class level, and distinguished their status and rank by clothing colors and patterns. With the development of cotton, linen and silk technology, the style of Ming Dynasty gradually developed from conservative to luxurious, but the class division was always extremely strict.

The development of Korean fashion culture experienced the inheritance and innovation of traditional costume culture and the penetration of western pop culture, and formed Korean culture through self-digestion. The Korean Wave culture which represented by K-POP swept cross Asia and even Europe and America. However, due to the mandatory constraint of some policies and long-term ideological constraints, people have not achieved real freedom about dressing.

2.2. Style, fabric and color

In the Eastern Roman Empire, the distinction of costumes vividly reflected the social hierarchy. The nobility frequently adorned themselves with luxurious silk garments, intricately embellished with gold threads and precious jewels, symbolizing their elevated status. In contrast, common civilians typically wore clothing made from more modest materials such as wool and linen, which were both practical and affordable. Notably, the use of specific colors was strictly regulated; purple and gold were exclusively reserved for the royal family, serving as powerful visual indicators of imperial authority, while civilians were restricted to wearing simpler, more subdued colors that clearly demarcated their social standing.

Due to the rigid class hierarchy in the Ming Dynasty, significant distinctions existed in the fabrics, colors, and styles of clothing. The royal family, for instance, predominantly wore yellow robes crafted from premium materials like silk. In contrast, commoners at the bottom of the social ladder were clad in rough linen garments. As for officials, their robes varied in color and pattern in accordance with the strict ranking system.

Korean clothing has strict requirements and aesthetic hegemony for people, especially for women, in modern Korean culture, members of Korean girl groups need to wear the specific clothing such as miniskirts to show their sexiness, which is show the instrumentation of women from the perspective of male condensed. Traditional Korean clothing focus on the division of labour on gender, using colour to differentiate women who is married, unmarried and old age, solidify the cycle of life with colour, and the synthetic fabrics dominated by fast fashion have low cost, but their breath ability and wrinkle resistance are really poor.

2.3. Beauty and practicality

The costume of Eastern Rome combines beauty and practicality. Beauty is exclusive to the nobles, the different of religion symbols and religion colour, conveying rights and beliefs. But civilians clothes are more comfortable and useful, which is helpful for them to carry out daily productive and life, that is a explanation of practical.

The aesthetics of Ming Dynasty was in sharp

contrast to practicality; People paid more attention to practicality because of the war that countries were not rich. In terms of aesthetics, clothing is the visual inscription of norm of etiquette, and colors and patterns are not only aesthetic choices, but also identity marks. Women's horse-faced skirts restrain their actions, and scholars directly criticize the gender opposition of Ming Dynasty costumes.

Although the royal family and officials and people were distinguished with grading, all patterns have been simplified; Ordinary people wore coarse, cheap and simple linen jackets which convenient for working in the fields, although short brown is wearable, it is inconvenient to operate, the military uniform is light and practical, and the quality of civilian fabrics is stagnant. Later, because of the steady rise of the national economy, people began to pursue more beautiful and standardized clothing patterns, nobles paid more attention to the beautiful and exquisite clothing embroidery. It is always impossible to achieve both aesthetics and practicality.

In South Korea, both workplaces and daily life exhibit an excessive focus on aesthetics over practicality, affecting both the elite class and the general public. Unspoken rules permeate both professional and academic spheres: In workplaces, women are expected to wear skirts with heels exceeding five centimeters, while men must wear suits with ties. On campuses, men's collared uniforms create a constricting collar effect, women are required to wear knee-length skirts, and the prevalent practice of bare legs in winter inflicts dual physical and psychological harm on women.

2.4. Commonalities and extensions

From this, we can infer the commonalities of clothing in the two eras. To a certain extent, economic development and the degree of ideological openness influence clothing styles. In modern times, South Korea can be analyzed as a case. Clothing reflects social culture and ideology. Recognition of the Ming Dynasty is an endorsement of its "rites". Clothing embodies social values: people choosing diverse, unconstrained clothing manifests equality and liberation. Absorbing foreign cultures and integrating them with local ones is evident, such as the Ming Dynasty's adoption of Persian patterns. Similarly, 21st-century Korea has formed unique fashion trends

by combining the Western fashion system with local culture.

In all cases, clothing serves as a medium, interweaving traditional culture, economic technology and ideological trends in different eras. This is "the interpretation of the spirit of the times by material carriers."

3.conclusion

By comparing different dynasties and historical periods, it becomes evident that both practicality and beauty have been emphasized equally. Attention to and adherence to open aesthetics are also significant. The clothing of more prosperous eras, such as the Song Dynasty and the Renaissance, reflects a liberated spirit and thought among people, demonstrating humanistic ideals and a will for free rebellion. In contrast, during other periods—such as the Ming Dynasty in China or ancient Rome—society was often controlled by theocracy and monarchy. Consequently, individuals experienced a relatively low degree of freedom in their choice of clothing; this led to an era characterized by an "one-sided" approach that prioritized beauty and practicality but ultimately failed to achieve balance. In modern America, minimalist styles alongside functional fashion reflect ongoing tensions between liberation of thought and value discipline. Similarly, formal wear and high heels in South Korea embody this duality: they express humanistic ideologies of freedom and openness while simultaneously concealing traditional rituals and bodily discipline. Clothing serves not only as an external signifier of class but also as a reflection of human spirit. To advance societal equality and freedom, values must be rooted in bodily liberation while respecting individual identity or not.

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