

A Preliminary Study of Mongol Costumes in the Ming Dynasty*

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元朝是中国历史上第一个由北方游牧民族建立的大一统王朝。元代的蒙古服饰样式具有鲜明的北方游牧民族特色。大量的资料表明，蒙古服饰不仅在元朝时期对当时的中国社会服饰行用状况产生了一定影响，而且在元王朝崩溃之后，仍然以不同形式在明代社会广泛传播行用。本文立足于历史文献的钩稽，在对文献记载进行总体研究后，对蒙元服饰诸种主要样式在明代的行用状况进行个案考察，并对其行用人群以及行用原因、社会心理等等进行初步考辨，希冀勾勒出蒙元服饰遗存在明代社会行用及演变之脉络。从服饰这一微观角度窥视金元时代以来北方民族内迁对中国古代社会造成的影响。

关键词：元代 明代 蒙古 服饰

The Yuan dynasty was the first great unified empire founded by an ethnic minority in Chinese history. A great number of ancient sources have proven that under the Yuan, the Mongols' distinctive costumes, expressive of their nomadic identity, exerted an influence upon Chinese fashions of the time. Even after the collapse of the Yuan, Mongol dress did not disappear but became even more popular in various forms throughout the following Ming dynasty. On the basis of examination of a large number of historical written materials, this paper makes an in-depth study of the various styles and uses of Mongol-style clothing in the Ming dynasty. It provides a panoramic survey in an attempt to outline the use and evolution of Mongol styles in the Ming and to examine some representative case studies in detail. Thus, besides discussing traditional issues in the history of clothing, such as the use, design changes and abandonment of Mongol clothing in the Ming dynasty, it initiates a series of studies from a sociological perspective, offering a preliminary study of the groups who wore Mongol-style clothing in the Ming dynasty, including their occupations, their reasons for using these costumes, and how this mode of dress influenced the social psychology of the period. It also attempts, via clothing, to discuss the changes in transitional Chinese society arising from the movement of nomadic ethnic groups in northern China to the hinterland

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(another question to be addressed).

Keywords: Yuan dynasty, Ming dynasty, Mongol, costumes

Introduction

The Yuan dynasty established by the Mongols was the first great unified empire to have been founded by an ethnic minority in Chinese history. Mongol costumes in the 13th-14th century had the typical features of northern or inner Asian nomadic ethnic groups; they were totally different from the classical clothes and hats of the Han ethnic group in the Tang and the Song. Though the Yuan dynasty lasted for only a short period, a huge number of objects, paintings and historical archives show that under the Yuan, the different style and form of Mongol costumes, characteristic of a nomadic way of life, exerted an influence upon contemporary Chinese costumes. Moreover, they did not disappear with the collapse of the Yuan dynasty; on the contrary, in different forms and styles, they became even more popular in the Ming society. This paper undertakes a general study of the use of various Mongol Yuan costume styles in the Ming dynasty, and attempts to analyze presumptively issues like the users of that clothing and the reasons and social psychology behind its use.

No special study or book discusses or analyzes the topic of “Mongol/Yuan costumes extant in the Ming dynasty.” However, papers and monographs on the costumes of ancient China are rich in contents and in categories, and studies of Yuan and Ming dress have been fruitful.¹ Some studies of this topic provide a general overview, and others include brief accounts of particular costume designs that continued to be worn in the Ming dynasty.² From the citation below, we can see that most of the studies have been introductory and sporadic; hence there is a need for a systematic investigation.

Before making a detailed analysis of Ming costumes influenced by the Mongol Yuan dynasty, it is essential to have a general view on their overall impact. This has been done through an investigation of historical sources.

Historical sources from the late Yuan dynasty to the mid- to late Ming dynasty include

1 See Li Zhitan, *List of References on the Costume Culture of China*, pp. 384-396. Su Rina, “A General Summary of the Study on the Costumes of the Mongol Empire and the Yuan Dynasty,” pp. 99-105.

2 To the best of my knowledge, important academic works on this subject include the following: Shen Congwen, *A Study of the Costumes of Ancient China*, pp. 513, 550, 554; Zhou Xibao, *A History of the Costumes of Ancient China*, pp. 355, 362, 365, 376, 381, 382, 391; Huang Nengfu and Chen Juanjuan, *A History of Chinese Costume*, pp. 245, 246, 293, 296, 300; Gao Chunming, *A Research on the Terminology of Chinese Costume*, p. 567; Chen Baoliang, *A History of Social Life in the Ming Dynasty*, pp. 206, 207, 213, 221, 223, 235. Important theses include the following: Henry Serruys, “Remains of Mongol Customs in China during the Early Ming Period,” In *The Mongols and Ming China: Customs and History*, pp. 1-2, 137-190; Wu Renshu, “Commoner Fashions and the Reaction of the Scholar-Officials in the Ming Dynasty,” pp. 55-110; Zhao Feng, “The Types and Historical Position of the Dragon Robe in the Mongol Empire and the Yuan Dynasty,” pp. 85-96.

general accounts of the impact of Mongol Yuan dress. Scholar-officials living from the end of the Yuan to the establishment of the Ming spared no energy in recounting theirs. As Song Lian (1310-1381) writes, “When the Song dynasty collapsed and the Yuan dynasty was founded, people’s clothing changed to square and conical straw hats and clothes with narrow sleeves.”³ Fang Xiaoru (1357-1402) writes:

“The Yuan dynasty rules the land to the south of the Yangtze River...and in less than ten years... the habits and customs of the Song dynasty have all disappeared. Scholars no longer wear ancient Chinese robes, and they imitate the language, dress and accoutrements of the rulers for quick promotion; otherwise people laugh at them as if they were backward or low-brow. Only those very confident of themselves and their beliefs remain unchanged; others definitely change their clothes.”⁴

As early as the founding of the Ming dynasty, in the first year of the Hongwu reign period (1368), Emperor Taizu swiftly promulgated an imperial edict requiring the restoration of Tang-style clothes and hats. *A Veritable Record of the Ming Dynasty* records that:

“Khublai Khan substituted nomadic customs for the systems of the Han Chinese in China. Members of all social classes shared the braided hairstyle, awl-like topknot and deep-brimmed nomad hat. Their clothes included pleated trousers, narrow sleeves and plaited-line robes with pleats at the waist. Women wore short garments with narrow sleeves and full skirts. The old tradition of Chinese costume disappeared...All nomadic clothes, language and surnames are banned.”⁵

The description above, which quotes from epitaphs on graves and the political edicts of the Ming government, not only gives us some knowledge of the features of Mongol costume, but also allows us to sense directly how strongly it influenced the Han Chinese under the Yuan. It is worth mentioning that throughout the Ming dynasty, this edict of prohibition, promulgated in the first year of the reign of Emperor Taizu, remained a major event in national political life. The issuance of the edict shows that at least in the early Ming period, the impact of Mongol costume styles was still widespread.

Unsurprisingly, in investigating and analyzing the historical archives of different periods of the Ming dynasty, the shadow of Mongol dress recurs. For instance, *A Veritable Record of the Ming Dynasty* records the social situation in the fifth year of the Hongwu reign (1372):

“The common people did not become civilized; cities, counties, villages and rural neighborhoods still followed closely the customs of the Yuan dynasty...Chinese clothes and hats were destroyed by the customs of the northern barbarians.”⁶

3 Song Lian, “An Epitaph for the Hermit-Scholar Li’s Gravestone on the Foot of Beilu Mountain,” f.1a.

4 Fang Xiaoru, “An Epitaph for Mr. Yu,” f.32a.

5 “Renzi, the second lunar month, the first year of the reign of Emperor Hongwu,” in *A Veritable Record of Emperor Taizu of the Ming Dynasty*, vol. 30, p. 525.

6 “Wuchen, the third lunar month, the fifth year of the reign of Emperor Hongwu,” in *A Veritable Record of Emperor Taizu of the Ming Dynasty*, vol. 73, pp. 1352-1353.

An imperial edict issued in the twenty-fourth year of the Hongwu reign period (1391) stipulated costume rites. Specifically, women of the gentry were instructed that: “Daily wear should be clothes with round collars with colors; no nomad clothes shall continue to be worn...”⁷

In the seventh year of the Zhengtong reign (1442), some officials observed: “Officials of the central and regional government, military leaders and soldiers, and ordinary people, advocate the wearing of the nomad system for everyday clothes and hats...with hanging tassel, feather inserted, a hat with appointed top and short sleeves or even no sleeves...We propose that the procuratorrate be required to issue an order and make the circuit procurators strictly forbid all these habits. The Emperor agreed.”⁸

A Compilation of My Learning (吾学编) records that: “In the first lunar month, spring, of the 4th year of the Hongzhi reign period (1491), nomadic clothes and nomadic languages were prohibited.”⁹

A Sequel to the Book Well Kept says, “At the beginning of the Hongzhi reign period, He Qiaoxin was promoted to be Minister of the Board of Punishments, and memorialized the Emperor asking for nomad clothes and language to be prohibited in the imperial capital.”¹⁰

Even in the late Ming dynasty, Mongol-style costume was still in use. Wang Tonggui, a member of the scholar gentry during the Ming period, could still write: “Nevertheless, to the north of the Yellow River, it is not rare to see people wearing hats with long brims and clothes with pleated waists, and women wearing clothes with narrow sleeves and short garments... Customs are long-lasting and hard to alter. People are happy to abase themselves and forget the clothes’ real origin.”¹¹

Although the Ming authorities reiterated the prohibition on Mongol-style costumes, the remnant impact of Mongol costumes of the Yuan dynasty continued, showing much strength in northern China.¹²

Case Analyses of Mongol Costumes in the Ming Dynasty

The late Yuan/early Ming scholar Ye Ziqi observed that Yuan dynasty garb “is suitable for

7 “Yiwei, the sixth lunar month, the 24th year of the reign of Emperor Hongwu,” in *A Veritable Record of Emperor Taizu of the Ming Dynasty*, vol. 209, p. 3116.

8 “Yichou, the 12th lunar month, the seventh year of the reign of Emperor Zhengtong,” in *A Veritable Record of Emperor Yingzong of the Ming Dynasty*, vol. 99.

9 Zheng Xiao, *Record of Great Politics*, in *A Compilation of My Learning*, vol. 9, in *A Collection of Ancient Copies and Rare Editions from Beijing Library*, Book 12, p. 58.

10 Li Zhi, “Lord He Qiaoxin, the Famous Minister of Economy,” in *A Sequel to the Book Well Kept*, vol. 16, in *A Sequel to the Siku Quanshu*, Book 303, p. 406.

11 Wang Tonggui, “The Disaster of the Mongol Disruption of China in the Yuan Dynasty,” in *An Enriched Compilation of Casual Talk and Hearsay*, in *A Sequel to the Siku Quanshu*, Book 1268, p. 255.

12 Also see Henry Serruys, *Remains of Mongol Customs in China during the Early Ming Period*, p. 189; Li Zhi’an, “Mongol Influence on Ethnic Han Chinese in the Yuan Dynasty,” pp. 47-48.

both the upper and lower classes; and it is hard to tell the difference between superior and inferior simply from their dress.”¹³ Archaeological finds and historical paintings also support the argument that the different styles of dress of the Mongol Yuan dynasty were shared and widely used among different social classes, thus contributing to their lasting influence. We have chosen some representative and typical Mongol-style costumes in the Ming era for the following case studies.

1. *The boli hat*

The *boli* hat (钹笠帽) was one of the most popular hats worn by the Mongols in the Yuan dynasty. The crown was round and the brim extended outwards and down. It gained its name from the fact that it was shaped like a cymbal (*boli*). The hat was worn by Yuan emperors, officials and male commoners. Records state that “both the officials and common people put on the (*boli*) hat with quite a round brim.”¹⁴ The most precious and luxurious *boli* hat belonged to the Yuan emperor. According to the chapter of “Costumes” in *A History of the Yuan Dynasty* (元史·舆服志), this hat had numerous designs, including one decorated with precious stones and a golden phoenix (宝项金凤钹笠), one with a brim decorated with jewels (珠缘边钹笠) and one topped with a golden phoenix (金凤顶笠). The most luxurious was the *boli* hat with the double crown of seven treasures (七宝重顶冠),¹⁵ which can be seen in historical paintings of the Yuan emperors.

At the same time, the *boli* hat was also used by ordinary Mongols in their daily lives during the Yuan dynasty, and this actually influenced the Han ethnic group. The wide use of the *boli* hat among commoners can be demonstrated by the archeological excavation of Yuan dynasty tombs across China.¹⁶

In fact, the *boli* hat still existed in the Ming dynasty and was used widely among many social classes. The most noticeable users were government clerks (胥吏) and family servants (家仆). The *boli* hats they wore are usually called *damao* (大帽, big hat) in Ming historical documents, possibly because they were much rounder and bigger than the traditional *futou* (幞头, headwrap) worn by the Han, as can be seen from the pictures mentioned above.

Government clerks (*xuli* 胥吏, *lixu* 吏胥 or *liyuan* 吏员), who worked at all levels of the bureaucracy, were subordinate to government officials. Many Ming dynasty essays and novels contain records of their wearing the *boli* hat. *Miscellaneous Records of Jinglin* (泾林杂记) records that, “one day when at leisure, the gate keeper reported that government clerks had come to deliver a letter. [The master] called them in. Both of them were wearing big hats and silk clothes with a plain weave, and seemed to be on official duty.”¹⁷ Literary works also

13 Ye Ziqi, “Chapter of Miscellaneous Systems,” in *Grass and Wood*, vol. 3, p. 61.

14 *Ibid.*

15 “Costume: Part I,” in *A History of the Yuan Dynasty*, vol. 78, p. 1938.

16 For representative archaeological achievements, see Liu Bao'ai and Zhang Dewen, “A Tomb of the Yuan Dynasty in Baoji City, Shaanxi Province,” p. 29.

17 Zhou Fujun and Zhou Xuanwei, in *A Sequel to Miscellaneous Records of Jinglin*, vol. 3, in *A Sequel to the Siku Quanshu*, Book 1124, p. 171.

portray government clerks wearing the “big hat.” *Amazing Tales* (拍案惊奇) has, “a group of people in big hats and green clothes... are clerks of the chief examiner.”¹⁸ In *A Biography of Yujiao Li* (玉娇梨) we read that “a person in green clothes and a big hat...is a clerk of the authorities.”¹⁹

Compared with officials, Ming clerks were a relatively large social and political group with notable social influence. Ming literati had numerous comments on clerks in their writings. Hou Fangyu (1618-1655), leader of the *Fushe* (复社, Restoration Society) in the late Ming dynasty, wrote: “Each day, the clerks go in groups. In each county their total number is not less than one thousand...so in a thousand counties, there would be 300,000 clerks.”²⁰ The famous scholar-official Gu Yanwu (1613-1682) stated that, “all power actually has been wrenched from the hands of officials and gone to the clerks; so-called officials have the name and nothing else. Clerks are the de facto governors of the country.”²¹ These views prove that clerks in the Ming dynasty were a social group with a large membership and strong political impact, and show that they wore the *boli* hat inherited from the Yuan dynasty. We cannot therefore ignore the Mongol hat’s influence upon Ming dress.

Another group of users wearing the *boli* hat were the family servants of Ming officials and the imperial family. In archives and documents, they are referred to as *yuanzi* (院子) or *jiaren* (家人). Chapter 14 of the *Amazing Stories: Second Series* (二刻拍案惊奇) records that, “Monsieur Zhao... called some *jiaren* who came here just now with big hats and *yisa* to go to the opposite gate.”²² *Stories to Awaken the World* (醒世恒言) said that: “these friends were not at all happy and brought with them five or six *jiaren*...each of their followers was in eye-catching clothes and big hats.”²³

Family servants undoubtedly spread the wearing of the *boli* hat, and hence it became a symbol of low-ranking servants. *Stories to Awaken the World* reads:

“That man laughed and said, ‘Actually, you did not recognize me; I am the servant Hu’er from Guo’s family...if you doubt this, you can go to the city gate and ask the gatekeeper whether I am really well-known or not.’ And the owner, seeing his big hat, just trusted him.”²⁴

18 Ling Mengchu, “Coincidentally Meeting Special Guests on the Huayin Road; Opening Thrice the Immortal’s Letter in Jiangling Prefecture,” in *Amazing Tales*, vol. 40.

19 Yi Di Sanren, “Making a Fool of Oneself without Any Choice,” in *A Biography of Yujiao Li with New Drawings and Critiques*, Chapter 12.

20 Hou Fangyu, “Government Clerks,” in *Collected Essays on Statecraft under the Reigning Dynasty*, vol. 24, f.4a.

21 Gu Yanwu, “Government Clerks,” in *Record of Daily Knowledge: Collected Annotations*, vol. 8, p. 486.

22 Ling Mengchu, “County Governor Zhao Presents Oranges; Official Wu Pays Taels for Free,” in *Amazing Tales: Second Series*, vol. 14, f.27a.

23 Feng Menglong, “Zhang Shu’er Wisely Extricates Herself from Yang Sheng,” in *Stories to Awaken the World*, vol. 21, f.25a.

24 Feng Menglong, “At the Small Bay, the Celestial Fox Gave a Book,” In *Stories to Awaken the World*, vol. 6, f.20b.

Another group who wore the *boli* hat were postmen (*yishi* 役使), who were in charge of the delivery of files and letters in the Ming dynasty. *Miscellaneous Records of the Governor* (守官漫录) records that their dress included small pockets and a conical hat (小囊笠帽, the *boli* hat).

In ancient Chinese society, *xuli* or clerks were always despised by the scholar-officials who complacently identified themselves as the “pure stream” (清流), while family servants belonged to “base commoners.” Similarly, the postmen actually belonged among lower-ranking occupations. Thus in the Ming dynasty, users of *boli* hats were in lower-ranking occupations, and their hats became a symbol of their identities. Traditionally, in the Yuan dynasty, this hat was widely used by commoners because of its convenience. The *boli* hat’s wide brim made it sun-proof and rain-proof. In *Records of Jade Decoration* (琐缀录), Yin Zhi (1431-1511), a scholar and member of the Imperial Academy, commented that the *boli* hat was “not the dress of a scholar-official,” but “can prevent sunburn.”²⁵ This made it a good choice for postmen and those who had to work outside.

In addition, some records in historical documents provide a political interpretation of the choice of headgear. For instance, in the Ming dynasty, the Ming encyclopedia *Collected Illustrations of the Three Powers* (三才图会), describes a hat called the *zaolijin* (皂隶巾 servant’s headwrap) which “is worn by people in base occupations” and further says that “this hat was worn by high-grade and respectable scholar-officials in the northerners’ Yuan dynasty, so Emperor Taizu had government runners wear it, with the intention of insulting certain people.”²⁶ This material suggests that the wearing of the *boli* hat among the lower classes of society in the Ming dynasty could have had a political motive. However, this stands out as the only source making such an argument, so further research is needed to confirm its truthfulness.

2. From the waist-thread coat of the Yuan dynasty to the *yesa* robe and pleated robe in the Ming dynasty

Yaoxian’ao (腰线袄, the waist-thread coat or *bianxian’ao*, 辫线袄 plait-line coat) was a very important and popular coat style in the Yuan dynasty. It had typical northern nomadic features, and has been mentioned frequently in previous studies.²⁷ With regard to its shape and style, Xu Ting, an ambassador to the Mongol from the Southern Song wrote:

“The waist-thread coat has numerous narrow pleats on the waist... and then people use red and purple silk thread to fasten on their waists. That is called a waist-thread. When on

25 Yin Zhi, *Records of Jade Decoration from the Jian Study*, vol. 4, f.7a.

26 Wang Qi and Wang Siyi, “Costume: Part I,” in *Collected Illustrations of the Three Powers*, p. 1506.

27 Important references include the following: Shi Weimin, *History of Social Life in the Yuan Dynasty*, p. 91; Su Rina, “Mongol Robes in the Era of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty,” pp. 29-35; Zhou Xun and Gao Chunming, *Tradition and Customs of Ancient Chinese Costume*, pp. 189-190; Dang Baohai, “The Plait-line Robe: A Costume of Ancient Mongolia,” pp. 198-266; Yang Ling, “The Plait-line Coat of the Yuan Dynasty,” in *Forum on the History of the Yuan Dynasty*, series 10, pp. 213-224.

horseback, it can tighten the waist and is eye-catching and beautiful.”²⁸

From this record we can see that the waist-thread coat had two typical features: decoration around the waist and other narrow and dense pleats on the lower hem. The lower hem is more or less like the pleated skirt worn by women today. Since the waist thread was usually made by twisting braids, the design’s biggest advantage was its suitability for riding, for “when on horseback, it can tighten the waist” of the rider. In the Ming dynasty, a member of the scholar gentry wrote that the advantage of this coat lay in the “denseness and narrowness of the waist pleats and convenience for riding.”²⁹ Thus we can see that the waist-thread coat was a special costume produced for the horse-riding nomad way of life.

The waist-thread coat was basically worn by the upper class during the Mongol. As Xu Ting claimed, “the Mongol Emperor and officials on and above the level of Secretary used to wear it.”³⁰ In the Yuan dynasty, its use gradually spread. *A History of the Yuan Dynasty* says that imperial guards and swordsmen and imperial followers in the Yuan dynasty wore waist-thread coats decorated with flowers in various colors.³¹

Thanks to the ethnic character and the wide use of the waist-thread coat, Han Chinese in the Yuan dynasty viewed as the symbol of the Mongols. *Grass and Trees* records that “The luxurious clothes of the northerners are like this: the top of the hat is golden; the coat waist is decorated with thread; the tops of the boots are decorated with goose feathers.”³²

This type of coat was inherited by the Ming dynasty and given a special meaning. *A Collection of the Code of the Great Ming* (大明会典), defined the waist-thread coat as the costume of officials in charge of imperial protocol during a defined period called *keqi* (刻期), signifying rapid completion of their work.³³ It writes that, “during *keqi*, they wear square headwraps and colourful waist-thread coats decorated with eagles and sparrow-hawks at front and back.”³⁴ This definitely shows a tradition inherited from the Yuan dynasty.

In fact, the significance of the influence of the waist-thread coat upon Ming attire lies in its dense and narrow pleats on the lower hem. This feature gave birth to a series of new coat styles in the Ming, among which the most popular were the *yesa* robe (曳撒袍) and the pleated robe (褶子衣).

The *yesa* Robe had many other names, like *yisa* (一撒). In one poem composed in the Yuan

28 Peng Daya and Xu Ting, Revised by Wang Guowei, *A Revision and Textual Criticism on Things of the Black Tartar*, f.7a.

29 Wang Tonggui, “The Disaster of the Mongol Disruption of China in the Yuan Dynasty,” In *An Enriched Compilation of Casual Talk and Hearsay*, vol. 41, p. 255.

30 Peng Daya and Xu Ting, Revised by Wang Guowei, *A Revision and Textual Criticism on Things of the Black Tartar*, f.7a.

31 “Costume: Part I,” vol. 78; “Costume: Part II,” vol. 79; “Costume: Part III,” vol. 80.

32 Ye Ziqi, “Chapter on Miscellaneous Systems,” p. 61.

33 *Keqi* means “at the appointed time.” It indicates that the official should finish the task quickly.

34 Shen Shixing and Zhao Yongxian *et al.*, “Hats and Costumes: Part II,” in “Scholars and Commoners’ Headgear and Clothes,” in *A Collection of the Code of the Great Ming*, vol. 61, in *A Sequel to the Siku Quanshu*, Book 790, p. 249.

dynasty, the waist-thread coat is described as having “the green and gold of the *yisa* robe and the green of the threads at the waist.”³⁵

With regard to its design, Liu Ruoyu (1584-?), a eunuch living in the late Ming, explicitly wrote in his palace history *Annals of the Imperial Palace*, “The *yesa* has an extended long back and two hems at each side. The front has two sections. At the lower hem, it has a horse-shaped pleat which stands up at the left and right.”³⁶ This record and some archeological finds clearly show the design of the *yesa* robe; it has a crossed collar, long sleeves, and dense pleats on the lower hem. The middle of the lower hem was plain without any pleats, and there were hems on each side. This robe was in fact a new version of the waist-thread coat of the Yuan dynasty.

The *yesa* robe became the informal wear of the upper class in the early and mid-Ming, ranging from emperors and princes to ministers and officials. In *Records of Jade Decoration* (琐缀录), Emperor Xianzong, when hunting grounds in the north, wore “a silk *yesa* robe decorated with shining red and golden dragons,” and Emperor Xiaozong put on, in the morning, “an *yishan* hat and dragon robe with a brocade round collar, and changed to a *yesa* robe and hook-like jade silkbraided after a meal.”³⁷ Thus we can see that the Ming emperor tended to wear the *yesa* robe in his spare time. Of the crown prince, it was said that everyday “[a]fter lectures and meals... the crown prince is to put on the *yesa* robe and gold or precious stones or hook-like jade silkbraided, and learn to practice Chinese calligraphy beside the western window.”³⁸ So *yesa* was called “an institution of the present Empire that should be followed.”³⁹

Many materials record eunuchs’ use of *yesa* robes. According to the *Annals of the Imperial Palace*, the eunuchs of the Ming court wore official uniforms, such as the red *yesa* robe with *qilin* (麒麟) patches, the *yesa* robe with a round collar and the light green *yesa* robe. The *Annals* also records that, “From the commander of the eunuchs to eunuchs dealing with protocol, all wear the *yesa*”;⁴⁰ “only the eunuchs dealing with protocol and the commander of the eunuchs and ministers’ eunuchs of every board of the imperial palace wear it.”⁴¹ This record demonstrates that the *yesa* robe was a kind of uniform for certain Ming eunuchs.

Officials also wore the *yesa* robe, as attested in many accounts in historical documents.

35 Hao Jing, “Songs and Poems: A Poetical Song on Being Drunk,” in *Collected Works of Lingchuan*, vol. 10, in *Collection of Ancient Copies and Rare Editions from Beijing Library*, Book 91, p. 562. Whether the name *yesa* comes from this poetic line or from the Mongol language needs further study.

36 Liu Ruoyu, “Records of the Wear of Officials inside the Imperial Palace,” in *Annals of the Imperial Palace*, vol. 19, f.2b.

37 Yin Zhi, *Records of Jade Decoration from the Jian Study*, vol. 8, p. 139.

38 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 19.

39 *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 5.

40 Liu Ruoyu, “Records of the Wear of Officials inside the Imperial Palace,” in *Annals of the Imperial Palace*, vol. 16, Haishan Xian Hall copy, Qing dynasty, f.3b.

41 Liu Ruoyu, “Persons in Charge of the Imperial Palace Affairs,” in *Annals of the Imperial Palace*, vol. 19, f.2b.

For instance, “During the reign of the Yongle Emperor (1403-1424), the Forbidden City was opened for people to go out and enjoy the Dragon-Boat Festival and Double Ninth Festival... literary officials of the Imperial Academy who wore small hats and the *yesa* robe followed the Imperial family to see the festivals.”⁴² In the Zhengde reign period (1506-1521), Kou Tianxu, adjutant of the Yingtian Prefecture (应天府丞), “every day puts on a small hat and the *yesa* robe to sit in the hall.”⁴³ *A History of the Ming Dynasty* records that:

“From the reign of the Yongle Emperor, the eunuchs who accompanied the emperor had to wear a *yesa* robe decorated with an embroidered image of the boa dragon. The image of the boa dragon was stitched on both left and right and fastened with silkbraids... It is informal wear... and there is a cloth called *xilan*, which is also like the *yesa* robe... it is convenient for riding a horse. When asked to join the Emperor at a banquet, neither the Emperor nor the officials wore robes, they just wore *xilan*.”⁴⁴

This indicates that the *yesa* robe was frequently used for informal wear at court, and that it inherited the advantage of being convenient for riding. From the middle of the Ming dynasty on, the *yesa* robe was not only informal wear, but also on many occasions a formal uniform. For instance, in the 13th year of the Zhengde reign (1518), Emperor Wuzong returned from Xuan Fu to the capital. All the officials of the imperial court “received an imperial order that they should wear *yesa* robes, big hats and phoenix belts... and on that day, civil and military officials all wore *yesa* robes, big hats, phoenix belts and colored clothes, welcoming the emperor in front of the Desheng Gate.”⁴⁵

Ming novels have lots of images of officials wearing the *yesa* robe as an official uniform. For instance, *Reprimanding the Treacherous* (斥奸书), a historical novel about current affairs under the Ming, describes the guards of honor of Wei Zhongxian, a rather influential eunuch in the Ming dynasty, as such: “the officials dressed in brocade who are in charge of the street... and the commander in charge of the horse stood in the middle; some wore big hats and the *yesa* robe, others were in military armor.”⁴⁶

In archeological excavations of Ming sites, lots of *yesa* robes have been discovered.⁴⁷ However, in the Ming dynasty, the use of the *yesa* robe was not identified with one group of people. Its use gradually extended from the upper classes to the middle and lower classes,

42 Yin Zhi, *Records of Jade Decoration from the Jian Study*, vol. 2, p. 37.

43 He Liangjun, “History: Part II,” in *Stories from Siyou Study*, in *A Sequel to the Siku Quanshu*, Book 1125, vol. 6, p. 556.

44 “Costume: Part III,” in *A History of the Ming Dynasty*, vol. 67, p. 1647.

45 “Yisi, the first lunar month, spring, the 13th year of the reign of Emperor Zhengde,” in *A Veritable Record of Emperor Wuzong of the Ming Dynasty*, vol. 158, pp. 3028-3029.

46 Wuyue Caomangchen, “To Have the Regret Passed and Support the Imperial Relatives, and Inspect in Person the Frontier and Make the People of the Liao and Ji Prefectures Respectfully Obey,” in *Reprimanding the Treacherous, a Novel about Wei Zhongxian*, Chapter 28.

47 For a representative archaeological achievement see the Cultural Relics Workers’ Team of Beijing Municipality, “A Briefing on the Excavation and Cleanup of a Ming Dynasty Tomb at Weizi Pit, Nanyuan, Fengtai District, Beijing,” Picture 6-2.

and in the mid- to late Ming, scholar-officials too began to use it as casual wear, especially at banquets. Wang Shizhen (1526-1590), a famous Ming scholar, wrote in his *A Goblet No Longer a Goblet* (觚不觚录) that “in recent years...the literati have definitely worn *yesa* robes when attending a banquet.”⁴⁸ Indeed, there are many similar records in the historical archives. Yin Zhi once wrote that:

“As I am retired and live at home and at leisure, I usually wear the *yesa* robe. Some people have asked me to wear the ancient Chinese *shenyifujin* robe. I answered: ‘I am a man of the present era, so I have to wear clothes of the men of today.’”⁴⁹

In *Records of Crimes* (罪惟录), the late Ming and early Qing dynasty historian Zha Jizuo (1601-1676) wrote, “Early in the reign of the Longqing Emperor...scholar-officials were suddenly proud of wearing the *yesa* robe, and competed to make it and wear it.”⁵⁰

The *Redundant Words by a Sitting Guest* (客座赘语), a historical notebook that records social customs in the region around Nanjing, says that: “Nanjing had many superb doctors during the reigns of Zhengde and Jiajing... most of them were practical, sincere and prudent, and they behaved as superior men. They usually wore *yesa* robes of green cloth and fastened on a small and white round hat with silk ribbons, with a pair of white leather boots.”⁵¹ *Amazing Tales: Second Series* also says that, “a family servant was wearing the *yesa* robe.” This shows that in the late Ming, servants also wore the *yesa* robe, as did other commoners.

The pleated robe (褶子衣) was another Ming costume that was heavily influenced by the Yuan waist-thread coat. Fang Yizhi (1611-1671), a well-known late Ming scholar, wrote in his representative work *Understanding Elegance* (通雅) that, “the pleated robe was born in recent ages...its lower hem has many dense and narrow pleats like a skirt.”⁵² This tells us that the lower hem of the pleated robe had thick pleats and not much space between pleats, like the *yesa* robe. Therefore, although the *yesa* robe’s changes in design were based upon the waist-thread coat, the pleated robe kept many more features of the waist-thread coat. In the archeological excavation of Ming sites, the discovery of pleated robes is richly significant.⁵³

From the discussion above, we can see that the *yesa* robe and the pleated robe, both of which originated from the waist-thread coat, were widely used in the Ming dynasty, and both were used by the ruling classes. However, the use the *yesa* robe spread from the upper classes to the lower classes, because the *yesa* robe’s design, inherited from the waist-thread coat,

48 Wang Shizhen, *A Goblet No Longer a Goblet*.

49 Yin Zhi, *Records of Jade Decoration from the Jian Study*, vol. 8, p. 139.

50 Zha Jizuo, “Hats and Costumes,” in *Records of Crimes*, vol. 4, in *The Third Edition of A Collection of Siku*, Book 9, f.5b.

51 Gu Qiyuan, “Various Doctors in Nanjing, the Southern Capital,” in *Redundant Words by a Sitting Guest*, vol. 7, p. 227.

52 Fang Yizhi, “Clothes,” in *Understanding Elegance*, vol. 36, in *Wenyuan Ge Siku Quanshu*, Book 857, p. 9.

53 For representative archaeological achievements see Chen Juanjuan, “The Art of Silk in the Ming Dynasty,” p. 67; Shandong Museum, “A Faithful Record of the Excavation of the Ming Period Mausoleum of Zhu Tan,” p. 35.

provided more convenience for riding and moving about. The pleated robe was confined to the upper class and was seldom used by the lower class, probably because commoners could not afford its flamboyant decoration. Nevertheless, I am not aware of any historical documents which explain why this was so. The question thus necessitates further study.⁵⁴

3. *The zhisun robe*

The *zhisun* robe (质孙服), also written in historical documents as 只孙, 直孙, *jixun* (济逊), *jisun* (济孙) or *zhixun* (只逊), was a ceremonial court dress granted by the emperor to higher-ranking court officials at luxurious court banquets in the Mongol Yuan dynasty. It held an important position in Mongol dress, and is mentioned several times in previous studies of Yuan history.⁵⁵ The *zhisun* robe held a very important position amid the costumes of the Yuan upper class, so Chinese documents and foreign archives on the Yuan period frequently refer to it. People in the Yuan period wrote that, “both the clothes and the hat for the banquet have the same form and design, and they are called *zhisun*,”⁵⁶ “Whenever the imperial court held a banquet for the Han Chinese, each participant would wear a hat and clothes with identical designs and forms. This garb is called *zhisun* and it is granted by the emperor,”⁵⁷ “The *zhisun* robe is particularly used for distinguished higher-ranking imperial officials when they meet and attend a banquet with the Son of Heaven.”⁵⁸

A History of the Yuan Dynasty gives a comprehensive summary of the *zhisun* robe: “In Chinese, *zhisun* means a dress of the same color. Participants at large-scale banquets at the inner court all wear it. Its winter design is different from that of summer, though it does not have a fixed design or form. All the imperial relatives, higher-ranking ministers or officials, those who have made great contributions and those who serve the emperor, are to wear it if the emperor bestows it on them. Lower-ranking singers and musicians and security guards also all have this kind of garb. Although these costumes are different for different social classes and the exquisiteness of their ornamentation, they are all called *zhisun*.”⁵⁹

From the discussion above, we can see that the *zhisun* robe worn by the emperor and high-ranking court officials at banquets typically had the same color, design and form, and the difference lay merely in its workmanship or the exquisiteness of its ornamentation; it was not

54 In fact, the sources show that “pleated robe” was just a general name indicating a style of clothing; it has many different detailed designs and furthermore has many different names.

55 Important research results include Yanai Wataru, “The Mongol *Zhama* and *Zhisun* Banquets,” pp. 945-956; Han Rulin, “A New Research on the *Zhama* Banquet of the Yuan Dynasty,” in *Collection of Felt Yurt*, pp. 247-254; Li Lisha, “A Study of the *Zhisun*: A Mongolian *Grande Toilette* in the Yuan Dynasty,” pp. 26-31.

56 Su Tianjue, “Miscellaneous Writings, Preface and Initial Records on *Great Statutes for the Administration of the Age*, Section on Banquets,” in *A Collection of Essays of the Yuan Dynasty*, vol. 41, f.3a.

57 Yu Ji, “A Stony Tablet for Wang Shiji in Jurong Prefecture,” in *Records on Studying Antiquity at the Dao Garden*, vol. 23, in *The First Edition of A Collection of Four Series*, f.8a.

58 Tao Zongyi, “The *Zhisun* Banquet Costume,” in *Nancun’s Notes upon Rest from the Plow*, vol. 30, p. 376.

59 “Costume: Part I,” vol. 78.

made to a fixed design.⁶⁰

Because the *zhisun* robe could only be worn “when it is bestowed by the emperor,”⁶¹ and because its users “can participate in the banquet only when they are granted such attire, people know who is favored by the emperor and who is not close to the emperor.”⁶² The bestowal of the *zhisun* robe on an official was thus a big event in every official’s political life in the Yuan, and was viewed as a great honor by the recipient. From the discussion above, we can see the strong influence of the *zhisun* robe upon the ruling class of the Yuan dynasty and we can also see its widespread use in the Ming dynasty.

Nevertheless, there have been few studies on the existence or disappearance of the *zhisun* robe in the Ming dynasty. Historical materials show that it was mainly used as a regular costume for the court bodyguards and guards of honor, who were called *xiaowei* (校尉) in the Ming dynasty. *A Collection of the Code of the Great Ming* reads that, “in the sixth year of the Hongwu reign period (1373), the emperor issued an imperial edict that... *xiaowei* should wear only *zhisun* robe, a fastened belt, a headwrap and a pair of boots.”⁶³ It also says that, “The brocade guards on duty both the East and the West City Circuit, numbering 500 altogether, and other men in charge of whip-throwing, fan-holding and umbrella-like towel-holding all wear the goose-feather hat, *zhisun* dress, gold and bronze belts and black boots. They all queue up outside the Wumen Gate.”⁶⁴

A Veritable Record of the Ming Dynasty states that, “Each *xiaowei* on duty has to wear a goose feather hat, a *zhisun* robe, a copper belt, and a pair of boots. They are to wear all these items whenever they go to court on duty.”⁶⁵ Besides the above records in authoritative historical writings, writers in both the Ming and the Qing have left records. For instance, *Writings after a Dream in Shining Spring* (春明梦余录), written in the late Ming or early Qing, notes that, “The *xiaowei* all wore *zhisun*, a costume whose name still followed the Yuan tradition...this used to be Yuan ceremonial dress, but now it has already become a costume suggesting the poor and the powerless.”⁶⁶

60 Li Lisha, “A Study on the *Zhisun*: A Mongolian *Grande Toilette* of the Yuan Dynasty,” pp. 26-31.

61 Su Tianjue, “Miscellaneous Writings, Preface and Initial Records on *Great Statutes for the Administration of the Age*, Section on Banquets,” in *A Collection of Essays of the Yuan Dynasty*, vol. 41, f.3a.

62 Wang Yun, “Epitaph of the Deceased Lord Lü, Commander-in-chief of the Army West of the Pass in the Great Yuan Dynasty,” in “Stony Tablets,” *An Unabridged Collection of Mr. Qiu Jian’s Literary Works*, vol. 57, in *A Collection of Rare Editions of Yuan Literary Works*, Book 2, p. 166.

63 Shen Shixing and Zhao Yongxian *et al.*, “Scholars and Commoners’ Headgear and Clothes,” in “Hats and Costumes: Part 2,” in *A Collection of the Code of the Great Ming*, in *A Sequel to the Siku Quanshu*, vol. 61, Book 790, p. 250.

64 Shen Shixing and Zhao Yongxian *et al.*, “Imperial Bodyguards,” in *A Collection of the Code of the Great Ming*, in *A Sequel to the Siku Quanshu*, vol. 142, Book 791, p. 458.

65 “First day, first year of the reign of Emperor Xuande,” in *A Veritable Record of Emperor Xuanzong of the Ming Dynasty*, p. 133.

66 Sun Chengze, “Brocade Guard,” in *Writings after a Dream in Shining Spring*, vol. 63, in *Collection of Wenyuan Ge Siku Quanshu*, Book 869, p. 195.

Miscellaneous Records of the Bean Garden (菽园杂记) writes that, “The *xiaowei* riding in the center wears red and green clothes decorated with ground flowers and a golden hat called the *zhisun* goose feather hat.”⁶⁷

Understanding Elegance also says that, “The dress decorated with ground flowers is called *zhixun*. The name came from the ‘*zhisun*’ of the Yuan dynasty.⁶⁸ ... The brocade guard, ranging from those who hold the emperor’s imperial sedan chair, those who hold the fans, those who strike the bell and those who hold the streamers and banners to those who strike the whip on the ground, all wear light green and red costumes made of silk which has been woven into flowers of five colors. A costume of this kind is called *zhixun*...now since they are worn by the *xiaowei* alone, people just write it as ‘*zhixun*.’”⁶⁹

In addition, among the imperial edicts of the Ming emperors references to the making of *zhixun* robes can be found here and there. For instance, *Unofficial History of the Wanli Reign* (万历野获编) says that, “In today’s imperial edicts, references to the making of the *zhisun* robe can be found time and again. This dress originated in the Yuan dynasty.”⁷⁰

Words of a Visitor in Chang’an (长安客话) also writes “When we saw the Emperor decree that 800 *zhixun* be made, we did not know what a *zhixun* was. Later, we found that it was the imperial guards’ brocade costume and goose feather hat.”⁷¹ This shows that the Ming dynasty had been in place for so long that people were not clear about the true and concrete denotation of the *zhisun* robe even though it was still in use.

To sum up, compared with the popularity of the *zhisun* robe in the Yuan dynasty, the Ming *zhisun* robe was not as popular as other costumes inherited from the Mongol Yuan despite its availability. Its users in the Ming dynasty were limited to lower-ranking people (下役之服). Whether, like the *boli* hat, the change indicated rejection of the previous dynasty, requires future research.

Concluding Remarks

Contrary to Henry Serruys’ thesis *Remains of Mongol Customs in China during the Early Ming Period*, the influence of the Mongol Yuan style of dress existed not only in the early Ming period but broadly and continuously throughout the Ming.⁷² Moreover, its different

67 Lu Rong, *Miscellaneous Records of the Bean Garden*, vol. 8, p. 100.

68 Actually, “*zhixun*” and “*zhisun*” may well have been the same thing, i.e., the change was a phonetic phenomenon that occurred over the course of history.

69 Fang Yizhi, “Clothes,” in *Understanding Elegance*, vol. 36, Book 857, p. 697.

70 Shen Defu, “*Bijia* Jacket and *Zhisun* Robe,” in *Unofficial History of the Wanli Reign*, vol. 26, p. 366.

71 Jiang Yikui, “Section on *Zhixun* Dress,” in “Miscellaneous Writings on the Imperial Capital,” in *Words of a Visitor in Chang’an*, vol. 1, p. 11.

72 Henry Serruys, “Remains of Mongol Customs in China during the Early Ming Period,” in *The Mongols and Ming China: Customs and History*, p. 190.

styles gained currency in a multiplicity of ways. Some were used only in particular occupations, like the *zhisun* robe. Some were mainly used by lower-ranking people, such as the *boli* hat. The *yesa* robe, however, spread downwards from the upper classes. The reasons for its spread included the well-established historical tradition of the Yuan dynasty, its adaptability to the needs of Ming society, and the political advocacy of the Ming government. Furthermore, some surviving designs of Mongol Yuan dress acquired symbolic meanings indicating particular identities or occupations, and this actually left a strong imprint upon the social psychology of the Ming period.

It is worth noticing that among the gifts awarded by Ming emperors to the leaders of northern Mongol tribes, costumes with characteristic Yuan features were usually seen as a whole set. *A Veritable Record of the Ming Dynasty* reads, “In the fourth year of the reign of the Zhengtong Emperor (1439), Khan Toytoya Buqa was awarded...a golden and floss felt hat with jewels... a *yesa* robe ornamented with symmetric lapels and with light and dark green flowers...a protective flowery jacket ornamented with gold threads, *qilin* and the four treasures...and a *bijia* jacket.” It also says that, “in the sixth year of the reign of the Zhengtong Emperor (1441), the Khan has been awarded satins of five colors, a protective ramie jacket ornamented with erect lapels and serpent dragons, a *yesa* robe, a *bijia* jacket and a *tieli*.”⁷³ All these records indicate that these costumes shared the same origin, i.e., their adaptability to the Mongol lifestyle and their suitability as rewards for the nomadic groups living in northern China.

From the discussion above, we can clearly see that after the large-scale immigration of the northern peoples to the Chinese hinterland during the Jin and Yuan era, Ming dynasty costume was quite different from that of the Tang and Song dynasties in several respects. To some extent, it reflects a different kind of social phenomenon.⁷⁴

Yu Shousui, who lived under the Ming, also believed that; in a 1519 memorial to Emperor Wuzong opposing Mongol dress, he wrote “costume is trivial to people, but it is related to important matters.”⁷⁵ Yu was right in pointing out the cultural psychological capacity of

73 “Guimao, the first lunar month, spring, the fourth year of the reign of Emperor Zhengtong,” in *A Veritable Record of Emperor Yingzong of the Ming Dynasty*, vol. 50, p. 969; “Jiazi, the first lunar month, spring, the sixth year of the Zhengtong reign period,” vol. 75, p. 1473. See also Wang Shizhen, “Awards to the Northern Nomadic Tribes,” in *Records of Other Miscellaneous Protocols of the Great Imperial Ming Dynasty*, in *A Collection of Yanshan Hall*, vol. 14, p. 259; “Awards to the Northern Nomadic Tribes,” in *A Research on Awards and Grants*, Part II, in *A Collection of Yanshan Hall*, vol. 77, p. 1482; Shen Defu, “Rich Awards and Grants to the Wala Tribe,” in *Unofficial History of the Wanli Reign*, vol. 30, p. 776.

74 In the Ming dynasty, there were, besides the traditional Han costume designs handed down from the Tang and Song dynasties, some new designs which came into being under the influence of Yuan costume designs, such as the small hat (小帽), the big hat, the *dahu* jacket (搭护), the pleat (褶子), the *yesa* robe, and so on. See Mo Dan, “Common Hats and Clothing,” in *Rhapsody on the Unification of the Great Ming*, vol. 2, in *A Collection of the Banned Books from the Siku: Historical Records*, Book 21, p. 55.

75 “Yimao, the first lunar month, spring, the 14th year of the reign of Emperor Zhengde,” in *A Veritable Record of Emperor Wuzong of the Ming Dynasty*, vol. 170, p. 3285.

costumes. If we connect this with a historical awareness conducive to further contemplation from the detailed perspective of costume styles, we will be able to see the changes in the situation of Chinese society following the Jin and Yuan dynasties and their influence on the Ming dynasty.

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