
The Principles of Traditional Chinese Everyday Dress

From Cosmos to Cut

華夏常服之道 自天地至裁剪

A Technical and Cultural Manual on the Ordinary Garments
of the Chinese Dynasties

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“The Yellow Emperor, Yao and Shun let their upper and lower garments
fall in place, and the world was well ordered — taking this, it is said,
from the hexagrams *Qian* (Heaven) and *Kun* (Earth).”

— BOOK OF CHANGES, GREAT COMMENTARY (易·繫辭下)

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1 Introduction

1.1 Dress as a Language of Cosmos, Order and Culture

In the Chinese tradition there is no neutral cloth. A garment is never merely a covering against cold and modesty; it is a diagram of the world worn on the body. The very word for civilisation in classical usage, **Huaxia** (華夏, *the flowering, ceremonious people*), is bound to clothing: the historian's gloss explains that the people were called *Hua* because of the beauty (華) of their garments and *Xia* because of the grandeur (夏) of their rites. To be dressed in the proper way was to be inside the human, cultivated order at all; to be "loose-haired and left-lapelled" (被髮左衽) was, in the classical imagination, to have fallen outside it. Clothing was thus a boundary marker between culture and its absence, and every seam carried a share of that weight.

This is why the oldest texts speak of dress in the same breath as government. The *Book of Changes* credits the sage-kings not with inventing weapons or laws but with "letting the upper and lower garments hang down" (垂衣裳), and takes the two-part costume — a dark tunic above, a lighter skirt below — directly from the two primal hexagrams, 乾 *Qian* (Heaven) and 坤 *Kun* (Earth). To dress correctly was to align oneself with the structure of the cosmos, and by that alignment to govern. The upper garment, worn toward the light, borrows the darkness of the pre-dawn sky (玄, a blackened blue); the lower garment borrows the yellow of the soil (黃). A person standing clothed is therefore a small axis between Heaven and Earth — literally a figure of **Tian-Di-Ren** (天地人, *Heaven-Earth-Humanity*), the great triad we will meet again and again.

Cosmology, however, was only the deepest layer. Upon it were folded ideas of social role, of measure and restraint, of seasonal propriety, and of the correspondence between colours, directions and the elemental forces. All of these had to be resolved, in the end, into something a tailor could cut from a bolt of hemp two feet wide. The interest of Chinese dress lies exactly in that translation: how a grand idea about Heaven and Earth becomes a decision about where to place a seam.

1.2 Why Everyday Dress, Not the Robes of State

It is tempting to study a civilisation's clothing through its most spectacular objects: the dragon robes of emperors, the twelve cosmic emblems (十二章) embroidered on sacrificial vestments, the ranked insignia of officials. These are magnificent, and they are also misleading. Court and ceremonial dress is, by design, exceptional. Its rules are codified precisely because it must freeze a symbolic order in place for a single solemn occasion. It tells us what the state wished to proclaim; it tells us rather little about the living principles of how the Chinese actually clothed the body.

Everyday dress — what a scholar wore to read in, what a farmer's wife wore to the loom, what a shopkeeper wore behind his counter — is the more honest witness. Precisely because it was not legislated in detail, it reveals which principles were deep enough to survive without enforcement. When the same crossed collar, the same right-over-left lapel, the same straight-cut panels and sash closure reappear in humble hemp across two thousand years and half a dozen dynasties, we are looking at something structural, not decorative. The ceremonial robe is the exception that proves the rule; the common jacket is the rule itself.

This manual therefore keeps its eyes on the ordinary. Where it names a garment — the **shenyi** (深衣, *deep robe*), the **ruqun** (襦裙, *short jacket with skirt*), the **daopao** (道袍, *Daoist-style scholar's robe*), the **bijia** (比甲, *sleeveless over-vest*) — it means the plain, wearable version, not the gilded court variant. Our question throughout is a craftsman's question: given these

convictions about the cosmos and society, how must the cloth actually be cut, joined, coloured and finished? We move, as the subtitle promises, from cosmos to cut.

2 The Grand Principles: A Theoretical Foundation

Before we can read a garment, we must know the ideas it is written in. Six principles recur across every period. They are not a checklist a tailor consulted; they are the shared mental furniture of the culture that made tailoring decisions feel natural. We take them in turn, then, in Section 3, watch each one descend into thread and cloth.

2.1 Heaven–Earth–Humanity (天地人)

The most basic Chinese picture of the world is a vertical triad: Heaven above, Earth below, and Humanity as the “one who completes the three” (三才, the Three Powers) standing upright between them. Dress inscribes this triad with almost embarrassing directness. The classical costume is fundamentally bipartite — an upper garment, **yi** (衣, *tunic, upper garment*), and a lower garment, **shang** (裳, *skirt, lower garment*) — and the pair is named together, 衣裳 *yishang*, as the ordinary word for “clothing.” Above and below are not interchangeable: the upper piece answers to Heaven, the lower to Earth, and the human wearer is the living seam that joins them.

Even when a single robe replaced the two-piece suit, the memory of the division survived as a horizontal waist seam, so that the “one” garment still openly declared its “two.” The most philosophically self-conscious garment of all, the deep robe, was explicitly theorised in these terms, and we will let its own classical description speak in the next section.

2.2 Yin and Yang (陰陽)

If Heaven–Earth–Humanity gives dress its vertical axis, **yin–yang** (陰陽, *the complementary dark and bright forces*) gives it its logic of paired opposites held in balance. Yang is bright, warm, outward, the front, the left in ritual orientation, the odd numbers, the round; yin is dark, cool, inward, the back, the right, the even numbers, the square. Good design does not eliminate one pole but composes the two so that each contains a seed of the other.

In clothing this shows first as the pairing of an outer, “yang” face and an inner, “yin” lining; as the meeting of two front panels that overlap rather than merely abut; and as the constant preference for balanced asymmetry — the collar crosses, but it crosses in a fixed, ordered direction. The overlap of the lapels is itself a yin–yang figure: two halves closing over the centre-line of the body, neither swallowing the other. The rule that the wearer’s right panel goes underneath and the left panel closes over it on top, **youren** (右衽, *right lapel worn beneath*), fixes which force takes the outer, yang position and is treated later as the single most jealously guarded principle in the whole tradition.

2.3 The Five Phases (五行)

Wu Xing (五行, *the Five Phases: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water*) is the grammar by which the Chinese correlated everything with everything: five directions, five seasons, five organs, five tones — and five “correct” colours. Each phase governs a direction, a season and a hue:

Phase	Direction	Season	Correct colour	Character
Wood	East	Spring	green / blue-green	青
Fire	South	Summer	red / vermilion	赤
Earth	Centre	(late summer)	yellow	黃
Metal	West	Autumn	white	白
Water	North	Winter	black	黑

These five are the **zhengse** (正色, *correct / pure colours*); all mixed hues are **jianse** (間色, *intermediate colours*) and rank below them. The distinction is not aesthetic snobbery alone; it maps onto the yin–yang and hierarchical order, so that placing a pure colour above and a mixed colour below re-states, in dye, the Heaven-over-Earth theme. The *Book of Rites* preserves the rule in lapidary form: 衣正色,裳間色 — “the upper garment in a correct colour, the lower garment in an intermediate colour.” A person dressed by this logic wears a small cosmological chart.

2.4 Harmony, Measure and the Mean (中庸)

Zhongyong (中庸, *the constant Mean, centred equilibrium*) is the ideal of hitting the centre and holding it: neither excess nor deficiency, in emotion, in conduct, and equally in dress. Applied to clothing it produces a distinctive aesthetic of *sufficiency*. The garment should be ample enough to fall in quiet vertical lines and to permit the ritual gestures of bowing and raising the hands, yet never so exaggerated that it calls attention to itself or impedes work. Proportion is governed rather than maximised.

This is why the mainstream of Chinese everyday dress tends toward the flowing, the moderate and the covered, and treats sudden fashion extremes with suspicion. When a period did push toward extravagance — the daringly high, low-cut skirts of high Tang, for instance — moralists complained precisely in the vocabulary of the Mean, and the following dynasty’s taste swung back toward restraint. Measure is also literal: garments were reckoned in defined units of cloth-width and body-measure, so that “correct” proportions were quantities a tailor could name, not merely feelings.

2.5 Natural Order and Cosmic Correspondence

Closely tied to the Mean is the conviction that human artefacts should echo, not defy, the patterns of nature and sky. A well-made garment was thought to embody the same regularities as the carpenter’s tools that measure the world — the compass, the set-square, the plumb-line, the balance. Roundness answers to Heaven, squareness to Earth, straightness to rectitude, and level symmetry to fairness. The garment becomes a wearable instrument of measure, and to put it on correctly is to carry the order of nature on one’s body.

This principle is what makes Chinese cutting so different from the sculpted, body-tracing tailoring of the European tradition. The aim is not to reproduce the contours of a particular body but to drape the body within a set of ideal geometric relations. The cloth is honoured as a woven plane; it is joined, not carved.

2.6 Social Role and the Fitness of Things

Finally, dress articulated one’s place in the human order — age, sex, marital state, occupation, rank — so that a person could be “read” correctly at a glance and treated with the fitting form of respect. It is easy to reduce this to a Confucian lesson about hierarchy, but that misses its everyday texture. The point was less rigid ranking than *fitness*: that a thing should suit its

occasion and its wearer, as a tool suits its task. A labourer's short jacket and trousers were not a badge of shame but the correct dress for labour; a scholar's long robe was correct for study and ceremony and would have been absurd at the plough.

Sumptuary law did, at times, reserve certain silks, certain colours (imperial yellow above all) and certain ornaments to certain ranks. But for our purposes the deeper and more durable expression of role is not the prohibition but the ordinary grammar of length, sleeve, material and colour by which a weaver, a widow, a bride and a magistrate each dressed as themselves. Role is written less in what was forbidden than in what was fitting.

3 From Principle to Practice: Cut, Construction and Detail

We now cross from idea to workshop. For each element of construction we ask: which principle is speaking here, and what did the maker's hands actually do? The single most eloquent classical witness is the "Deep Robe" chapter of the *Book of Rites*, which reads a whole garment as a cosmological instrument. It is worth quoting at some length, because nearly every principle above is named in it:

古者深衣,蓋有制度,以應規、矩、繩、權、衡。

制:十有二幅,以應十有二月。

袂圓以應規;曲袷如矩以應方;負繩及踝以應直;下齊如權衡以應平。

"In antiquity the deep robe had a definite system of measures, answering to the compass, the set-square, the plumb-line, the steelyard and the balance. Its construction used twelve panels, answering to the twelve months. The sleeve was rounded to answer the compass; the crossed collar was squared like the set-square to answer the square; the back seam ran straight to the ankle to answer the plumb-line; and the lower hem was even as steelyard and balance, to answer the level."

— BOOK OF RITES, CHAPTER "THE DEEP ROBE" (禮記·深衣)

Here is the entire programme of this section in a single ancient paragraph: round sleeve, square collar, straight back-seam, level hem, and a panel-count keyed to the calendar. We take the elements one by one.

3.1 Straight Cut versus Curve: the Woven Plane Honoured

The foundation of Chinese construction is the *straight cut*. Cloth came from the loom in a fixed width — classically a bolt roughly 二尺二寸 (about two feet two inches) wide — and the garment was built by seaming together rectangular and trapezoidal panels cut with the grain, wasting as little of the precious woven plane as possible. The body of a robe is essentially a set of straight vertical widths; the skirt is a series of straight panels pleated or gathered to the waist. This is the deep robe's "twelve panels for the twelve months": the number is symbolic, but it is also a real count of real cloth-widths.

Against this rectilinear ground, curvature enters only where a principle demands it, and it is therefore always meaningful. The sleeve is rounded at its lower edge "to answer the compass" — Heaven's roundness at the point where the arm, in the gesture of salutation, sweeps a circle. The collar is squared "to answer the set-square" — Earth's rectitude at the throat. Straight for the body's uprightness, round for Heaven, square for Earth: the three geometries are distributed by meaning, not by whim. A maker who understood this never rounded a hem for mere prettiness; roundness was Heaven's, and it went where Heaven belonged.

3.2 The Crossed Collar (交領) and Right Lapel (右衽)

The signature of Han-tradition dress is the **jiaoling** (交領, *crossed collar*): the two front panels are cut to extend up into collar bands, and they cross over the chest in a shallow *y*, one lapping over the other and tying at the side. This single feature carries an extraordinary symbolic load. The overlap is a yin–yang embrace of the two front halves over the body’s centre-line; the squared corner where the bands meet is the “set-square” of the deep-robe text; and the *direction* of the crossing is a moral absolute.

In the living tradition the wearer’s *left* panel always closes *over* the right, so that the edge of the underlying right panel points toward the wearer’s right side — hence 右衽, “right lapel.” The opposite closure, left under right, 左衽 *zuoren*, was reserved for two categories only: the dead, who are dressed in mirror-reversal, and, in the classical stereotype, peoples outside the Huaxia sphere. To wear one’s collar the wrong way in life was thus to signal either a corpse or a foreigner. No rule of Chinese dress was more stable across the dynasties, and none was defended more fiercely, because it encoded the whole boundary between order and its inversion in a single fold of cloth. When you close a Han jacket, your right hand tucks its panel beneath and your left brings its panel across on top: the gesture itself is the tradition.

Alongside the crossed collar, everyday dress also used the **round collar** (圓領, *yuanling*, *a closed curved neckline*) — especially the Tang round-collar robe — and, in later periods, the standing collar. But the crossed collar remained the emblematic form, the one a person drew to mean “Chinese clothing” at all.

3.3 Proportion: the Ratio of Above to Below

Because the costume is a Heaven–Earth diagram, the ratio of upper to lower garment is never accidental; it is one of the most sensitive registers of a period’s taste and of a principle’s emphasis. Broadly, three families of proportion recur.

In the *classical balance*, upper and lower are commensurate: a hip-length or thigh-length tunic over a floor-length skirt, the waist seam falling near the natural waist. This is the Han ideal and the deep robe’s equilibrium — Heaven and Earth given comparable dignity, the Mean made visible. In the *raised-waist* family, best known from Tang women’s dress, the skirt is bound high — at or above the bust, the **qixiong ruqun** (齊胸襦裙, *chest-high jacket-and-skirt*) — so that the lower garment dominates and the figure reads as a long descending column. Here Earth’s portion is magnified into flowing verticality and grace. In the *lowered, jacket-over-skirt* family of Ming women’s dress, the jacket lengthens to cover the hips and the waist seam drops, restoring a sober, covered, ground-hugging balance after the Song’s own quiet restraint.

A tailor reading a period could locate its spirit in this one measurement: where does the waistline sit, and which of Heaven or Earth is given the greater share of the body’s height?

3.4 Sleeve Forms and Lengths

The sleeve is where the Mean and social role speak most plainly, because it is the part of dress that most directly helps or hinders the working body. Everyday clothing therefore favours sleeves that are cut wide enough for dignity and gesture but not so vast as to obstruct.

The characteristic dress sleeve is wide and often deepened at the cuff into a rounded, pouch-like curve — the “round sleeve answering the compass.” At its most formal and leisured, in scholars’ robes, this becomes the very broad **da xiu** (大袖, *great sleeve*), whose sweeping arc embodies unhurried cultivation and can even serve as a pocket. But the great sleeve is a garment of leisure; it announces that its wearer does not labour. For work, everyday versions

narrow the sleeve markedly, and labourers wore the **narrow sleeve** (窄袖, *zhaixiu*) that leaves the hand free, sometimes with the forearm bound. The sleeve length — reaching past the fingertips so that, folded back, it returns to the elbow, as the deep-robe text specifies — is itself a statement of measure: long enough to cover the hands in respect, proportioned back to the body by a fixed rule.

Half-sleeved and sleeveless layers gave everyday dress its flexibility: the Tang **banbi** (半臂, *half-sleeve jacket*), a short-sleeved over-jacket, and the later sleeveless **bijia** (比甲, *long sleeveless vest*) let a person add warmth or formality to a narrow-sleeved base without sacrificing the free use of the arms.

3.5 Collars, Closures and the Sash

If European tailoring closes the body with buttons and shaped seams, the Chinese tradition closes it, for most of its history, with *ties and a sash*. The crossed collar is fastened by short cloth tapes, **xidai** (繫帶, *fastening ties*), sewn at the seams — one inside, one at the outer side — so that the garment is literally knotted onto the body. Over this, a **sash** (帶, *dai*, a *waist band or belt*) gathers the robe at the waist, defines the Heaven–Earth seam, and lets the wearer adjust ease and warmth at will.

This closure is deeply consonant with the principles. It preserves the uncut integrity of the woven panels (no buttonholes cut into the cloth); it is soft, adjustable and forgiving of different bodies, which suits the drape-not-carve philosophy; and the act of tying, like the direction of the lapel, is a small daily performance of order. Buttons did exist — knotted cloth buttons, **pankou** (盤扣, *looped knot-buttons*), and small toggles at the collar — but they remained minor until the Qing period, when the Manchu standing-collar garments made the knot-button and a row of closures a normal, visible feature. The shift from hidden tie to visible button is one of the clearest material signatures of the Qing in Han everyday dress.

3.6 Seam, Reinforcement and the Structural Vocabulary

The garment's construction repeats its symbolism at the level of the needle. The most charged seam is the **back seam** (負繩, *fu sheng*, the “*carried cord*”): the central vertical join running down the spine of the deep robe, which the classical text asks to fall “straight as a plumb-line to the ankle,” making the wearer's uprightness literally structural. To sew that seam crooked was, in this frame, a small moral failure.

Everyday construction otherwise relied on flat, durable joins suited to hand-sewing and hard wear. Raw edges were turned and felled so that no fraying showed; hems were doubled; and the points of greatest stress — the underarm gusset, the side vents, the base of the collar, the ends of the sash-ties — were reinforced with extra stitching or small squared patches. Winter garments were built as three layers, an outer face, a wadding of silk floss or, later, cotton, and an inner lining, quilted through in parallel lines to keep the wadding in place; the humblest padded jacket thus still obeys the outer-yang / inner-yin logic of face and lining. A well-made common garment shows almost no seam on its outer face: the woven plane is kept whole and quiet, and the labour is hidden inside, which is itself an expression of the Mean.

3.7 Colour and Pattern: Symbolic and Practical

Colour in Chinese dress is read on two registers at once. *Symbolically*, it follows the Five Phases and the pure-versus-mixed hierarchy described above: a correct colour above and a mixed colour below restates Heaven over Earth; specific hues carried seasonal and directional meaning; and certain colours were socially reserved — most absolutely the bright imperial yellow of

the later dynasties, but also, at various times, particular purples and greens tied to official rank. Undyed or lightly dyed cloth — the natural greys and off-whites of hemp and ramie, the 白 “white” of the commoner — was itself a marker of ordinary status, and plain dark blue-black from indigo became, for centuries, the everyday colour of the working population.

Practically, dye was expensive and light-fast colour more so, which reinforced the symbolic hierarchy with an economic one: saturated, even, colour-fast reds and purples signalled wealth because they *were* costly. Pattern followed the same double logic. Woven or embroidered motifs carried explicit wishes and meanings — cranes and pine for longevity, mandarin ducks for marital union, the peony for wealth, seasonal flowers for the turning year — while their density and refinement quietly signalled the household’s means. Everyday dress used such motifs sparingly and often only at border, cuff and collar, where a narrow patterned band (**yuanling** (緣, *yuan*, a contrasting trim)) both decorated and, practically, protected and reinforced the edges most exposed to wear. Ornament, in the everyday register, almost always also does structural work.

3.8 Material and Its Working

The hierarchy of cloth is straightforward and old: silk (絲/帛) at the top, bast fibres — hemp and ramie (麻) — for the majority through most of history, and cotton (棉) rising from the Song and Yuan periods to become, by Ming and Qing, the ordinary clothing fibre of the common people. Wool and fur belonged mainly to the north and to nomadic influence. The name of the deep robe’s sober cousin worn by commoners and in mourning, the plain undyed hemp garment, reminds us that for most people, most of the time, “everyday dress” meant hemp or, later, cotton in natural or indigo tones.

Material discipline followed the drape-not-carve philosophy. Because cloth was woven to a fixed width and was costly in labour, it was cut with maximal economy along straight lines, and garments were made to be unpicked, washed flat, and re-assembled or remade — a construction logic of *reversible, respectful* tailoring quite unlike the permanently sculpted Western coat. Silk was reserved for the outer, seen surfaces and for those who could afford it; a common strategy was a silk or fine-cotton face over a humbler lining, putting the “yang” material outward and economising within. In every case the material was worked so as to preserve the integrity of the woven plane: honoured, joined, and returned whole to the wash.

4 Dynastic Expressions of Everyday Dress

The principles are constant; their emphasis and their translation into cloth are not. We now walk chronologically through the major periods, asking for each: what did ordinary men and women actually wear, which principles were foregrounded or bent, and what changed at the level of the cut.

4.1 Zhou and the Early Period: the Template is Set (c. 1046–256 BCE)

The Zhou is where the grammar itself is laid down. The foundational costume is the two-piece 衣裳 *yishang*: a crossed-collar, right-lapelled tunic tied at the waist over a wrapped skirt, with the earliest and clearest statement of the Heaven-above / Earth-below symbolism in the dark upper and lighter lower garments. Beneath, before true sewn trousers were common, the legs were covered by separate leg-wraps or knee-coverings; the **bixi** (蔽膝, *knee-cover*, a ceremonial apron-panel) descending in front is a fossil of these early leg coverings preserved into ritual dress.

The great early synthesis is the **shenyi** (深衣, *deep robe*), the garment the *Book of Rites* theorises. Its innovation is to *sew* the upper tunic and lower skirt into one continuous robe — “deep” because it wraps the body deeply and continuously — while preserving the waist seam that keeps the Heaven–Earth division legible. In its early wrapping form the skirt portion is cut so that one front panel extends into a long triangular wrap, the **quju** (曲裾, *curved hem*), that spirals around the body and ties at the back or side; this both closed the robe securely before the age of the button and produced the elegant helical drape characteristic of the archaic silhouette. The Zhou thus fixes, once and for all, the crossed collar, the right lapel, the sash closure, the panel-built straight construction, and the cosmological reading of the two-part suit. Everything after is variation on this template.

4.2 Han: the Classical Ground-Form (206 BCE–220 CE)

The Han dynasty gives the tradition its classical, self-conscious form and its very name — **Hanfu** (漢服, *Han-Chinese clothing*) means, at root, the dress of the Han. Everyday men’s dress is the crossed-collar robe: either the wrapping-hem 曲裾 for more formal wear or, increasingly through the dynasty, the simpler and more practical **zhiju** (直裾, *straight hem*), in which the front panel drops straight to the hem instead of spiralling, closed by ties and sash. The straight-hem robe is the more economical cut and the ancestor of essentially every later long robe; its triumph over the curved hem is the first great “simplification for daily life” in our story.

Women wore the same crossed-collar principle in two-piece form as the **ruqun** (襦裙, *short jacket and skirt*): a short waist-length or hip-length jacket, the 襦 *ru*, tucked into or worn over a long pleated skirt, the 裙 *qun*, tied at the natural waist. This *ruqun* is the single most important and durable women’s garment in all of Chinese history; almost every later women’s fashion is a re-proportioning of these same two pieces. Han taste keeps the balance classical: waist at the waist, sleeves ample but ordered, colours following the correct/intermediate hierarchy, the whole reading as sober equilibrium. The principle most foregrounded here is the Mean itself — the Han produced the canonical, “correct” version against which all later periods would define themselves as more elaborate, more austere, or more foreign.

4.3 Tang: Openness, Variety and Foreign Currents (618–907)

The Tang is the great cosmopolitan exception, and its everyday dress shows what happens when a confident, outward-facing empire relaxes the Mean toward abundance and admits foreign currents along the Silk Road. Three developments matter.

First, for men, the everyday standard shifts from the crossed collar to the **yuanlingpao** (圓領袍, *round-collar robe*): a robe with a closed, curved neckline fastened at the right shoulder, narrower in the sleeve, worn belted with soft boots and a soft cap. Practical, tidy and originally of northern and Central-Asian inspiration, it becomes the ordinary dress of officials and commoners alike and shows the tradition absorbing a foreign closure without abandoning its wrap-and-belt logic. Beneath and behind it, the crossed collar never disappears; it simply shares the stage.

Second, for women, the *ruqun* is dramatically re-proportioned upward into the raised-waist and 齊胸 chest-high forms: the skirt is bound high across the bust and the short jacket becomes very short, so that the figure reads as a long, high-waisted column of flowing skirt. Sleeves range from wide and floating to slim; a long light **pibo** (披帛, *a draped silk stole*) loops over the arms, adding movement. The half-sleeve 半臂 jacket is a common everyday layer. Early Tang tends to slimness; high Tang, notoriously, toward fuller figures and broad, low-cut, brilliantly dyed garments that later moralists read as a lapse from measure. Here the principle bent is precisely *zhongyong*: Tang tests the ceiling of the Mean.

Third, the period's openness let women wear men's round-collar robes and "foreign" riding dress with narrow sleeves and trousers for activity and travel — a striking flexibility of social-role dress. The Tang thus foregrounds variety and correspondence-with-abundance while keeping the deep structure — panels, wrap, belt, right-over-left where the crossed collar appears — intact.

4.4 Song: Refined Restraint (960–1279)

The Song answers Tang abundance with a deliberate return to the Mean, now sharpened into an aesthetic of refined, scholarly plainness. The waistline drops back toward the natural waist; colours cool to soft, muted, often monochrome tones prized by a literati culture that read extravagance as vulgar; ornament thins to narrow trims and quiet woven grounds. If Tang is the tradition at its most expansive, Song is the tradition at its most disciplined.

The emblematic Song everyday garment, worn by both women and men, is the **beizi** (褙子, *a long, straight, open-fronted overcoat*): a slim outer robe with straight parallel front edges that hang open or barely meet, long side vents, and narrow or moderate sleeves. Its beauty is entirely in line and proportion — two long vertical edges falling from shoulder to hem — and it is the purest garment-embodiment of *zhongyong* in the whole tradition: nothing added, nothing subtracted, the woven plane honoured as unbroken vertical fall. Women wore it over a modest *ruqun* with a slender skirt; men, over inner robes. The Song is where restraint stops being a rule imposed from outside and becomes the very content of good taste. The principle foregrounded is the Mean as *beauty*, not merely as morality.

4.5 Ming: Restoration of the Han Tradition (1368–1644)

The Ming, founding itself explicitly as a restoration of Han-Chinese rule after the Mongol Yuan, consciously revived and codified Han-tradition dress, and it is the Ming versions of many garments that modern Hanfu revival takes as canonical. The crossed collar returns to full prominence; the round-collar robe is retained for officials; and a rich, orderly, layered everyday wardrobe develops.

Everyday men wore long crossed-collar or round-collar robes — the scholar's **daopao** (道袍, *a crossed-collar robe with interior tie and side pleats*) and the plainer **zhiduo** (直裰/直身, *a straight-cut long robe*) — over inner garments and trousers, belted or sashed, with a variety of soft caps and the stiffened *fangjin* kerchief marking the educated. Women's dress settles into the **aoqun** (襖裙, *lined jacket over skirt*): a jacket, now often *lengthened* to cover the hips and fastened with a standing or crossed collar, worn over a pleated skirt. The signature Ming skirt is the **mamianqun** (馬面裙, *"horse-face" skirt*), a wrapped skirt with a flat, undecorated panel at front and back — the "horse face" — flanked by crisp knife-pleats, often bordered with a patterned hem-band. Over the jacket, the sleeveless **bijia** (比甲, *long sleeveless vest*) adds a layer of warmth and formality while leaving the arms free — a thoroughly practical everyday garment.

The Ming re-proportioning lowers and lengthens: jacket over skirt, waistline dropped, silhouette covered and composed. The principle foregrounded is *role and order restored* — a deliberate, almost archival re-statement of the Han grammar, cleaned and systematised, which is exactly why it reads today as the "standard" historical Chinese look.

4.6 Qing: Han Everyday Dress under Manchu Rule (1644–1911)

The Qing is the great disruption, and it sharpens our whole argument, because it is precisely in *everyday* dress that we can watch principles persist under pressure. The Manchu conquerors

imposed their own dress and the queue on men under the “keep your head or your hair” decree: adult Han men had to adopt Manchu-style dress — the side-fastening *changpao* robe with a curved right closure, standing collar, narrow sleeves often ending in the hoof-shaped **matixiu** (馬蹄袖, “horse-hoof” cuff), and knot-button 盤扣 closures — and the crossed collar largely vanished from men’s public wear. The visible button-row and standing collar replace the hidden tie and crossed lapel: the single clearest material break in our story.

But the decree was gendered and partial — “men submit, women do not” (男從女不從) was the popular formula — and Han women, along with monks, the dead, and actors on stage, largely kept Han-tradition dress. Han women’s everyday wear therefore preserved the crossed or standing collar jacket over a pleated skirt: the *ao* jacket, now typically with a standing collar and knot-buttons under the arm, over the *mamianqun*, or the two-piece **aoku** (襖褲, *jacket and trousers*) for ordinary work. Sleeves widened again in later Qing women’s fashion, and broad decorative borders — sometimes so wide they nearly covered the garment — became a Qing hallmark of means. Through all this the deep structure survives in the women’s line: the two-part composition, the pleated skirt, the layered jacket, the ornamented protective borders, the right-hand closure.

Thus the Qing shows the principles at their most resilient. Even where the state forcibly replaced the men’s silhouette, the underlying logic — wrap-and-fasten to the right, compose in two parts, honour the woven plane, mark role and season by material and colour — continued in the women’s everyday wardrobe and re-emerged, transformed, in the later garments that grew out of it. What changed was the surface: the closure moved from tie to button, the collar from crossed to standing, the fit from ample to closer. What endured was the grammar.

5 Conclusion: the Enduring Principles

5.1 What Stays Constant Across the Dynasties

Walk the whole road from Zhou to Qing and a small set of constants stands out beneath all the change of proportion, colour and closure. The costume is composed in *two parts*, an upper and a lower, restating Heaven and Earth even when sewn into one robe. It closes by *wrapping to the right*, the crossed collar and right lapel surviving as the tradition’s deepest reflex, defended even against a conquering dynasty. It is *built from straight panels* of a fixed-width woven cloth, joined rather than carved, so that the plane of the fabric is honoured and the garment can be unpicked, washed and remade. Curvature is admitted only where it means something — round for Heaven at the sleeve, square for Earth at the collar, straight for uprightness down the back. *Proportion is governed* by the Mean, and a period’s spirit can be read in a single measurement, the height of its waistline. And *colour and material speak a double language* at once symbolic and social, correct hue over mixed, silk over hemp, ornament doubling as reinforcement at the edges that wear.

These are not six independent rules but one integrated conviction seen from six sides: that a garment should be a small, correct model of a well-ordered cosmos and a well-ordered life, drawn in cloth. The dynasties are variations; this is the theme.

5.2 Why These Principles Still Matter

The relevance of this tradition today rests on three legs. *Aesthetically*, the drape-not-carve philosophy — flat, straight-cut panels falling in quiet vertical lines, ornament held to the borders, proportion governed by ratio rather than by fashion’s extremes — is a complete and coherent design language, and one increasingly studied as an alternative to Western sculpted tailoring.

Its restraint reads as strikingly modern.

Functionally, the same logic is quietly sustainable in ways the present values: straight-cut, low-waste panels; soft, adjustable tie-and-sash closures that fit many bodies; layered garments added and removed by season; and construction designed to be unpicked, washed flat and remade rather than discarded. A tradition that treated cloth as too precious to cut carelessly has much to say to an age learning the cost of disposable clothing.

Culturally, these principles remain a living root of identity. The contemporary *Hanfu* revival is not nostalgia for court splendour but a return, precisely, to the everyday grammar this manual has traced — the crossed collar, the right lapel, the *ruqun* and the long robe — because it is in that ordinary grammar, not in the emperor's dragon robe, that people recognise themselves. To close a jacket left-over-right is still, quietly, to perform a two-thousand-year-old idea of order. That is the final lesson of everyday dress: the deepest principles were never the ones reserved for grand occasions, but the ones worn plainly, every day, until they became simply the right way to dress.

夫服者，禮之興也。

“Dress is where ritual order takes its rise.”

A NOTE ON SOURCES. Classical passages are drawn from the received texts of the *Book of Rites* (禮記), especially its “Deep Robe” (深衣) and “Jade-Pendant” (玉藻) chapters, and the *Book of Changes* (易經) “Great Commentary” (繫辭). Translations here are the author's own working renderings, kept close to the sense of the originals. Terminology follows standard usage in the study of Chinese dress history; all characters are given in traditional orthography.