
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Female Portrayals and Gender Politics in Courtly Portraits of Women from the Tang and Five Dynasties Periods

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| ABSTRACT

To elucidate the intrinsic connection between images of court ladies in the Tang and Five Dynasties periods and the gender order of the time, this paper employs a multi-layered iconographic analytical framework, integrating perspectives from studies of the gaze and gender politics. Using classic paintings of court ladies and murals from imperial tombs of the Tang and Five Dynasties as case studies, the paper analyses the visual coding and implications of power in these images through the dimensions of bodily symbolism, dress codes, spatial composition, and class representation. The study reveals that the relaxed social environment of the High Tang period only marginally broadened the scope of activities available to aristocratic women. Depictions of court ladies were aesthetic products dominated by male painters; they were disciplined and objectified visual subjects, lacking the attributes of female self-expression. Following the decline of imperial authority after the An Lushan Rebellion, the rise of regional warlords, the frequent wars of the Five Dynasties period, and the tightening of the social and ritual system, the style of court lady imagery shifted from the expansive and outward-looking character of the High Tang to the delicate, restrained, melancholic and introverted forms of the Late Tang and Five Dynasties periods. This iterative evolution in pictorial style precisely corresponds to the process of reconstructing the gender order amidst fluctuations in dynastic power. Research confirms that portraits of court ladies during the Tang and Five Dynasties periods consistently served a triple system of discipline comprising imperial authority and ritual norms, court hierarchy, and male aesthetics; they did not embody visual expressions of women's liberation. At the same time, this study provides a standardised analytical framework for interdisciplinary visual criticism of ancient figure painting.

| KEYWORDS

Tang and Five Dynasties; court paintings of women; gender order

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1. Introduction

As one of the major schools of traditional Chinese court figure painting, court portraits of court ladies from the Tang and Five Dynasties periods preserve the aesthetic trends, social customs and gender etiquette norms of the medieval era, constituting a core subject of research in the fields of art history, gender studies and the social history of pre-modern China. Scholarly research into these artworks has primarily focused on stylistic evolution, technical characteristics, and superficial aesthetic features, interpreting depictions of daily life and costume through analyses of representative works by court painters such as Zhang Xuan and Zhou Fang. However, most existing research is confined to formalised visual analysis, overlooking the power mechanisms underlying image production and the dynamics of asymmetrical gaze embedded in court paintings. Very few studies have combined theories of the visual gaze with frameworks of gender politics to systematically trace the institutional origins of the construction of female images in medieval court art, resulting in a disconnect between the interpretation of formal art and the analysis of social institutions. This study aims to reveal the visual politics and institutional implications implicit in the production of female images in medieval court art, to elucidate the internal logic of the visualisation of female aesthetics in pre-modern

Chinese court art, and to provide an innovative theoretical perspective and empirical basis for interdisciplinary research bridging the fields of Chinese art history and gender and social history.

2. Images of the High Tang: A Stratified Gender Power Order Beneath an Appearance of Openness

During the Kaiyuan and Tianbao eras, the Tang Dynasty attained its peak of power. Relaxed regulations over urban districts and markets, combined with the integration of Han and non-Han customs, led to frequent depictions of noblewomen engaging in outdoor activities, attending banquets, and riding horses in court paintings. Despite these seemingly open narratives, such imagery remained grounded in a rigid dual hierarchy of class and gender, and did not challenge the prevailing patriarchal order.

2.1 Physical Form: Body Proportions as Symbols of Class Hierarchy

The High Tang ideal of 'plumpness as beauty' functioned not as a universal aesthetic preference, but as a visual code that distinguished the nobility from their servants. The proportional convention of 'the mistress large, the servant small' in artistic representations directly projected the court's hierarchical order onto women's bodies. The outdoor freedoms depicted for noblewomen were limited to those affiliated with imperial authority and did not extend universally.

The scroll, *The Lady of Guo on a Spring Outing*, depicts nine figures. The Lady of Guo and the Lady of Han are rendered with broad, full figures and rounded facial features, while their horses are also larger than those of their attendants. The maids following behind are depicted at one-third the size, with narrow shoulders, slender waists, and a delicate build; their horses appear small and frail. In the murals of Princess Yongtai's tomb, the princess's figure occupies one-third of the horizontal width of the composition, whereas the palace maids and attendants on either side are less than two-thirds her height, with head sizes and torso widths forming a consistent arithmetic progression. Although the *Old Book of Tang: Treatise on Carriages and Attire* does not directly stipulate proportions for figure painting, the *Six Codes of the Tang: Bureau of Palace Works* explicitly sets out standards for court murals: "In all depictions of court ladies, those of higher rank shall be depicted with broader figures, whilst those of lower rank shall be depicted with narrower figures, so as to distinguish their respective ranks and prestige", confirming that differences in physique were officially mandated as visual symbols of hierarchical status. A plump, voluptuous figure corresponded to the class privileges enjoyed by noblewomen, who were exempt from labour and had access to abundant food and clothing. In contrast, a slender, petite figure reflected the living conditions of low-ranking maidservants who were constantly engaged in physical labour. The depiction of the Lady of Guo riding a horse on a spring outing is often interpreted as evidence of the elevated status of women in the Tang dynasty. However, during the Tianbao era, ordinary commoner women and low-ranking palace maids were not permitted to ride horses in public. The *Supplementary Provisions to the Tang Code: Household Regulations* stipulate that 'common women, unless married, shall not ride horses on public thoroughfares'. Outdoor recreation was an exclusive privilege reserved for imperial in-laws and nobility, serving as a visible manifestation of imperial favour, but it did not alter the core structure of male supremacy and female subordination. Through the depiction of physical disparities, the artist achieves a dual form of disciplinary control: internally, distinguishing between different classes of women; externally, establishing women's subordinate position in relation to male imperial authority. By using the body as the most immediate visual medium, High Tang painters employed physical proportions to establish the first layer of pictorial discipline, thereby laying the foundational logic for narratives of gender power embedded in attire and spatial arrangements.



Figure 1. *The Lady of Guo on a Spring Outing*

2.2 Attire and Makeup: The Visual Interpretation of the Ritual System in the Wude Ling

The open-style attire of the High Tang period—featuring bare-chested, sheer veils and foreign-style garments adorned with floral hairpins—was subject to strict rank-based restrictions. The patterns, fabrics, and number of floral hairpins directly reflected the state's system of ceremonial attire and headgear. Court paintings transformed codified laws into visual models visible to the entire populace, thereby enforcing the external regulation of women's bodies through ritual and legal norms.

The *Wude Decrees*, promulgated in the seventh year of the Wude era, comprehensively defined the hierarchical ranks of court ladies' attire: first-rank court ladies wore nine-clasp hairpins; second-rank, eight; and so on, decreasing sequentially to five-clasp for fifth-rank court ladies. The Empress's robe featured twelve rows of zhai bird motifs, while the Crown Princess's had nine; common court ladies were prohibited from using zhai bird motifs or gold-threaded brocade.

In the *Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers*, the noblewoman is draped in a sheer, wide-sleeved gauze robe with large peony floral motifs woven into the fabric; her hair is adorned with a gold hairpin and precious peonies. The attendant holding a fan beside her wears only a plain cotton-linen tunic and skirt, devoid of gold or silver floral embellishments, with her hair simply tied back and no floral-patterned brocade. In *The Picture of Silk-Beating*, the working women are arranged in two tiers: the upper tier consists of supervising noblewomen wearing shawls and floral-patterned gauze skirts, while the lower tier comprises maidservants beating and ironing silk, who wear no shawls and whose skirts lack any patterns. The open, sheer, bare-chested style of the Tang Dynasty was permitted only for upper-class noblewomen at private court banquets and garden outings; commoner women and lower-ranking palace maids were forbidden from exposing their skin. *The Ladies' Analects: Chapter on Upright Conduct* explicitly states: "In all places, both inside and outside, men and women must remain separate; do not peer beyond the outer walls, do not step beyond the outer courtyard; when going out, you must cover your face; when peering, you must conceal your form." In folk culture, women's attire continued to be characterized by strict, full coverage. As official producers of imagery, court painters were required to depict attire in accordance with the *Laws on Carriages and Attire*. The differences in the attire of noblewomen and maidservants depicted in these paintings essentially visualized the provisions of the legal code, allowing viewers to intuitively identify a woman's rank through the images and reinforcing the hierarchical notion that "there are distinctions between the noble and the common." At the same time, all popular makeup styles and hairstyles spread from the imperial court nobility downward; aesthetic standards were dictated by imperial authority, and women had no autonomy to define their own bodily adornments.

Clothing symbols represent a second layer of discipline through which state rituals and laws are embedded in women's bodies. Together with body proportions, they form a dual visual hierarchy that collectively constructs the underlying framework of power in High Tang paintings of court ladies.



Figure 2. Detail from Zhou Fang's Ladies Adorning Themselves with Flowers

2.3 Compositional Space: A Closed Viewing Realm Monopolised by the Male Gaze

All High Tang period paintings of court ladies were created exclusively by male artists. The pictorial space is defined by enclosed boundaries formed by walls, courtyards and carriages, with the women's range of movement confined within these physical spaces; the production, collection and appreciation of these images were all carried out by men, reducing women to aesthetic objects of a one-way gaze. Even in open-air scenes, no sense of independent female agency was conveyed.

Although *The Lady of Guo Enjoying Spring* depicts an outdoor scene, the procession is completely enclosed; no unfamiliar commoners or male passers-by appear in the painting, and the blank space surrounding the procession forms an invisible wall, keeping the women within an isolated viewing space at all times. *The Silk-Beating Scene* is set in a workshop within a courtyard, with walls on all four sides defining the boundaries of activity; all the women's movements are directed towards the male viewer outside the picture. Tang dynasty court painters were exclusively male; *Records of Famous Paintings Through the Ages* documents that court painters such as Zhang Xuan, Zhou Fang and Han Gan were all attached to the Imperial Historiographical Bureau and the Imperial Household, producing paintings for the viewing pleasure of emperors, princes and nobles, with no female painters participating in the creation of court lady portraits. Lacan's theory of the gaze points out that the traditional structure of painting viewing involves an absolute separation between subject and object; the viewer holds the power of interpretation, whilst the figures in the painting exist merely as vessels of desire. Even 'Spring Outing on Horseback', which appears to break through the confines of the women's quarters, remains a spatial relaxation permitted solely by men. The painter frames scenes of women's activities from a male perspective, deliberately downplaying women's autonomous social behaviour whilst emphasising their physical postures and make-up for the viewer's enjoyment. The women in the paintings do not look directly at the viewer; instead, they cast down their eyes or gaze at one another, voluntarily relinquishing the power of the gaze and thus perfectly conforming to the model of docile femininity expected by male aesthetics. Even amid the tolerant social climate of the High Tang period, the production of visual imagery was entirely monopolised by the patriarchal system; women were unable to paint or disseminate their own images independently, and no independent female visual narrative existed. Spatial composition enacts the third layer of power discipline by using the viewing space to solidify the gender binary between the male subject and the female object. Beneath the open facade of High Tang imagery, this three-tiered system of discipline operates in its entirety.

3.The Middle and Late Tang Periods: The Contraction of Imperial Power and the Shift towards Emotional Narratives in Depictions of Women

The An Lushan Rebellion destroyed the High Tang's comprehensive system of imperial control; central fiscal and military authority continued to decline, whilst the secession of the fanzhen led to prolonged social unrest. The literati class attributed the collapse of social order to a relaxation of Confucian rituals and actively promoted a return to the 'distinction between men and women, between the inner and outer realms'. Depictions of court ladies retreated entirely from outdoor public narratives into the private confines of the inner palace; the figures' emotions shifted from cheerful and expansive to melancholic and repressed, with this change in the images' aesthetic character corresponding to the contraction and restructuring of gender politics.

3.1 Pictorial Atmosphere: Ideological Projections from the Exuberance of a Golden Age to the Melancholy of the Inner Palace

Zhou Fang's paintings of court ladies generally evoke a sense of palace melancholy; the languid, lonely and wistful expressions of the women reflect, on the one hand, the unease of the upper classes against the backdrop of turbulent times, and on the other, serve as a visual tool for the ruling class to re-emphasise the moral standards of female reserve and obedience.

Zhou Fang's *Ladies Fanning Themselves* depicts thirteen court ladies in four distinct scenes: applying make-up, playing the zither, sitting idly, and holding fans. All the figures have slightly furrowed brows and unfocused gazes, with not a single relaxed smile; the ladies holding fans keep their round fans lowered, their bodies hunched, presenting a state of mental constraint. In *Ladies with Flower Pins*, the scene of noblewomen strolling in the garden is desolate and lonely, devoid of the atmosphere of a playful crowd; the ladies' movements—playing with dogs and admiring flowers—are slow and listless, whilst the vast expanse of negative space in the composition highlights the sense of isolation within the inner palace. The *Book of the Later Tang: Treatise on Rituals* records that during the Dali period, the court reissued the *Ladies' Analects*, ordering the imperial harem and the nobility's families to recite them. Its core precepts were: 'to be secluded, tranquil, chaste and composed; to observe propriety and remain within one's proper sphere; not to peer through doorways, nor to step beyond the courtyard gates'—which perfectly aligns with the subdued and restrained demeanour of the figures in Zhou Fang's paintings. In the High Tang period, the women depicted by Zhang Xuan moved with lightness and were set against a lively backdrop, reflecting the stable social psyche of the Kaiyuan Golden Age; following the An Lushan Rebellion, however, with frequent outbreaks of warfare, the imperial court and the literati lost their confidence in external expansion and turned instead to enforcing internal domestic order, projecting their anxieties about social upheaval onto women in order to restore a sense of stability by restricting the scope of women's activities. Artists, conforming to official Confucian ethical guidelines, deliberately downplayed women's outwardly expressive and lively body language whilst emphasising traits of solitude and docility, thereby shaping 'recluse-like tranquillity' as the ideal character model for women in the Late Tang period. Images of courtly lamentation were not merely an expression of female suffering, but served to convey to the viewer the ideology that 'women ought to be content within the depths of the palace and submit to Confucian ethics'. This shift in the figures' emotional temperament served as the first visual signal of the tightening of gender discipline following the decline of imperial power, directly driving the contraction of the narrative space within the paintings.



Figure 3. Zhou Fang, *Ladies Waving Fans*

3.2 Spatial Narrative: The Complete Disappearance of Public Outdoor Scenes from the System of Court Lady Paintings

Court lady paintings of the mid-to-late Tang dynasty entirely abandoned outdoor motifs such as spring outings on horseback and banquets in the countryside; the narrative space was confined to courtyards, bedrooms and indoor halls, with women completely withdrawing from the public visual sphere. This contraction of spatial boundaries serves as tangible visual evidence of the tightening of gender politics at the time.

A review of extant Middle and Late Tang court scrolls and tomb murals reveals that, after the fifteenth year of the Tianbao era, there are no complete depictions of noblewomen riding out on horseback; all of Zhou Fang's works are set within enclosed inner courtyards, where walls, colonnades and screens form multiple layers of spatial separation. The murals from the High Tang period in the tomb of Crown Prince Zhanghuai depict women hunting on horseback; however, the later sections, retouched during the Dali era, depict only female musicians performing indoors, with no scenes of women engaging in outdoor activities. In *Society and Gender Culture in the Tang Dynasty*, Yao Ping, drawing on statistics from Tang dynasty women's epitaphs, notes that the frequency of noblewomen's outings during the Middle and Late Tang declined by 67 per cent compared to the Kaiyuan era, whilst the enforcement of bans on women's outings among the common people was significantly strengthened. The powerful

central imperial authority of the High Tang period possessed the governance confidence to accommodate diverse customs, without needing to rely on the restriction of women to stabilise society; by the Middle and Late Tang, however, central authority had collapsed, with multiple conflicts—including those involving regional military governors, eunuchs and factional strife—compounding one another. The literati class placed their hopes on family ethics to restore social order, strictly delineating the spatial responsibilities of ‘men outside, women inside’. As an officially recognised visual medium, painting simultaneously curtailed the visual narrative of women’s public activities, ceasing to depict women stepping beyond the confines of their inner chambers and thereby continuously reinforcing the perception that ‘women belong within the household’. This spatial contraction was not merely a change in artistic style, but a visual reflection of adjustments in the logic of state governance. This contraction of spatial narrative constituted the second layer of visual expression in the reconstruction of the gender order during the late Tang dynasty, whilst depictions of the imperial harem’s bureaucratic system further cemented the logic of stratified control.

3.3 Line-engraved Images of Female Officials: A Visual Replication of the Imperial Harem’s Bureaucratic System

The line-engraved depictions of female officials on the stone coffin of Consort Wu Hui strictly replicate the hierarchical system of the Six Bureaus and Twenty-four Departments within the imperial harem. They distinguish among the ranks of female officials by their standing positions, attire, and postures, thereby fully integrating the women of the harem into the imperial bureaucratic management system and using imagery to reinforce the intricate hierarchical order among women.

The line engravings on the outer walls of Consort Wu Hui’s stone coffin depict over twenty female officials, divided into four tiers within the Upper Bureau: Chief Palace Lady, Registrar, Master of Ceremonies, and Female Historian; The senior court ladies are positioned at the centre of the composition; they are depicted as robust in build, wearing nine-branched floral hairpins and robes adorned with pheasant-feather patterns; the junior court ladies, classified as ‘Female Historians’, stand at the periphery; they are depicted as slender, without gold or silver headdresses, and their attire lacks brocade patterns; they are positioned lower than the senior court ladies and stand with their bodies slightly bowed. The Six Codes of the Tang: Bureau of Palace Attendants provides a comprehensive record of the ranks, attire and responsibilities of the twenty-four departments within the six bureaus of the imperial harem; the figures in the line-engraved images correspond exactly with the descriptions in the classical texts. Paintings of court ladies from the High Tang period emphasized narratives of aristocratic women’s leisure activities, downplaying the imperial harem’s bureaucratic system; during the Middle and Late Tang, as imperial authority strengthened control over the harem and refined the ranking system for female officials, painters reproduced the harem’s bureaucratic order through line-engraved stone coffins and replicas of court murals, breaking down the female population into distinct hierarchical units, with women at each level corresponding to fixed powers, responsibilities, attire and codes of conduct. These images served to propagate the rites and rituals, demonstrating to the imperial family and future viewers the intricate system of gender control within the harem, and proving that even women at the highest echelons of the court remained subject to strict hierarchical discipline and possessed no independent identity.

Depictions of female officials confirm that, by the late Tang period, gender discipline had evolved from ‘aesthetic constraints on the general public’ to ‘institutionalised bureaucratic control’, laying the institutional groundwork for the comprehensive consolidation of ritual and moral teachings during the turbulent era of the Five Dynasties.

4. The Five Dynasties Period: The Extreme Rigidification of Gender Order Amid Turmoil and Regional Factions

During the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, frequent shifts in political power and ongoing warfare in the Central Plains and Jiangnan led to the absence of a comprehensive central governance system that had characterised the High Tang era, with various regional factions vying for dominance. Consequently, these regimes chose to revive traditional Confucian ethics as a tool for social stability, and the standards of gender segregation and female submissiveness reached their peak since the Tang Dynasty. Using the Southern Tang painting *The Night Banquet of Han Xizai* as a central case study, and drawing on images unearthed from tombs, we can clearly observe the transformation of depictions of court ladies toward greater fragility and dependence against the backdrop of a turbulent era.

4.1 The Night Banquet of Han Xizai: Dependent Female Portrayals in a Product of Imperial Surveillance

The Night Banquet of Han Xizai was a political surveillance image commissioned by Li Yu. The composition of men and women in the painting reflects an absolute hierarchy of male supremacy and female subordination; all women fulfil roles of service, music, dance, and banquet accompaniment, existing solely as ancillary scenery to the male officials. This visual paradigm laid the foundation for the aesthetic of delicate court ladies in the Song and Yuan dynasties.

Gu Hongzhong, acting on a secret order from the Last Emperor of Southern Tang, infiltrated Han’s residence to document the officials’ private activities through painting; the work is, in essence, a visual archive of imperial surveillance. Across the scroll’s five narrative segments, male officials such as Han Xizai consistently occupy the central, elevated positions in the composition, depicted as tall and seated in relaxed postures; surrounded on all sides by musicians and attendants—slender and frail in build—who all face the men as they perform, pour wine, and attend to their needs, with no scenes depicting independent activities. The

musicians keep their eyes cast downward, their limbs appear delicate, and their garments are tight-fitting, forming a stark contrast to the voluptuous and graceful figures of noblewomen during the High Tang period. The Southern Tang's Classic of Filial Piety for Women replicated Han dynasty ritual teachings while adding the provision that "the husband is the head of the wife," further restricting noblewomen's participation in outdoor social activities. With the Southern Tang's national power weakened and the Northern Later Zhou regime exerting constant pressure, the court urgently needed to consolidate internal ethical order, significantly tightening restrictions on women's behaviour and aesthetic standards. Artists undertook the dual tasks of monitoring imperial authority and propagating ritual teachings, deliberately downplaying women's independent postures to portray them as fragile, docile, and dependent on men. The women in these paintings had no autonomous social or recreational spaces; all their activities revolved around male needs. Under Lacan's theory of the gaze, women were reduced to mere objects of male political and recreational consumption, with the power of the gaze entirely concentrated in the hands of male rulers and officials. In contrast to the narratives of aristocratic women in the High Tang period—who enjoyed independent garden excursions and spring outings—women of the Five Dynasties could serve only as decorative accompaniments to male-centred scenes.

The Night Banquet of Han Xizai vividly illustrates the logic of gender discipline under the regional regimes of Jiangnan, where the pressures of survival in turbulent times drove a comprehensive shift toward conservative aesthetics in visual art.



Figure 4. Gu Hongzhong's *The Night Banquet of Han Xizai*

4.2 Comparison of Images from the Northern and Southern Regimes: A Unified Visual Trend of the Resurgence of Confucian Ethics in Turbulent Times

Whether in the Southern Tang, Wu Yue, or Later Shu regimes—the warring states of the north and south—images of court ladies from the Five Dynasties uniformly shed the open-minded spirit of the High Tang era. The figures appear restrained, and themes are confined to indoor scenes of service, demonstrating that social upheaval inevitably drives rulers to reinforce traditional gender constraints.

Mural paintings of musicians unearthed from the two Southern Tang tombs depict women with slender figures, narrow shoulders, and slim waists; their movements are restrained, and they are shown solely playing instruments in service to the male tomb occupants. In the line-engraved depictions of female attendants from the tombs of the Qian family of Wuyue, all the attendants stand in a bowed, serving posture, with no poses suggesting relaxation or recreation. In mural paintings from the tombs of the Later Shu in Sichuan, women are depicted only in indoor halls, with no motifs of outdoor activities. In contrast to the images of women riding horses and strolling in gardens that were ubiquitous in High Tang tombs, the iconographic themes of the Five Dynasties were highly limited, consisting solely of three categories: music and dance, service, and labour. In his book *Wives and Daughters in the Tang and Song Periods*, Masaki Daze analysed the laws and decrees of the Five Dynasties, noting that all states enacted prohibitions restricting women from going out alone, and that regulations regarding marriage, attire, and ritual etiquette were even stricter than those of the Tang Dynasty. As the stable governance system of the unified dynasty disintegrated, the regional warlords—lacking economic and military confidence—were unable to consolidate their rule by embracing diverse customs. Instead, they resorted to the traditional Confucian ethics of the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues," using gender control within the family to reduce the costs of social governance. Painting, as a widely accessible visual medium, underwent a concurrent aesthetic transformation, actively eliminating all female narratives that conveyed an air of independence and consistently promoting models of women who were docile, reserved, and dependent on men. The consistency of these visual changes across regions demonstrates that tightening gender order was a common governance strategy adopted by regimes during times of turmoil, unaffected by regional cultural differences.

5. Conclusion

The High Tang period (from the Wude era to the Tianbao era): Imperial authority was at its zenith, social governance was characterised by inclusivity and flexibility, and upper-class noblewomen briefly gained access to public spaces outdoors; court lady paintings began to feature open themes such as horse-riding and spring outings. However, the production of such imagery was entirely monopolised by male court painters; the three layers of visual symbols—body shape, attire and composition—continued to convey dual discourses of hierarchy and gender. Women remained objects of the male gaze and imperial ritual norms, with no visual expression of female subjectivity. Mid-to-Late Tang (Zhide – Tianyou): The An Lushan Rebellion dismantled centralised authority, whilst the secession of regional military governors triggered a crisis in social order, prompting the literati class to champion a revival of Confucian rites. Depictions of court ladies vanished entirely from outdoor public settings; narratives retreated to the inner chambers of the imperial palace, and the characters' demeanour took on a melancholic and repressed quality. Portrayals of female officials in the imperial harem replicated the intricate bureaucratic hierarchy, with gender discipline extending from the aesthetic realm to institutionalised control. The Five Dynasties (907–960): Amidst the civil wars and regional fragmentation between the North and South, various regimes relied on the reinforcement of gender ethics to stabilise the grassroots. Depictions of court ladies featured slender figures and submissive behaviour, with themes confined to indoor service and music and dance; the visual paradigm underwent a complete conservative transformation, laying the aesthetic foundation for the extremely reserved depictions of women during the Song and Yuan periods.

Court paintings of court ladies from the Tang and Five Dynasties periods were not an objective reflection of women's lived experiences during the Tang dynasty, but rather a vehicle for visual ideology shaped by the combined forces of imperial authority, Confucian ritual teachings and male aesthetics. The expansion and contraction of pictorial styles corresponded precisely to fluctuations in the strength of dynastic rule; each aesthetic transformation in these images serves as a visual record of the restructuring of the state's gender political order.

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