

Dressing for Misfortune: Clothing, Catastrophe, and the Materialization of Suffering in Ming Narrative Culture

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Abstract

This paper examines clothing in Ming vernacular fiction as a material form through which female suffering becomes socially visible. Focusing on Xingshi yinyuan zhuan and selected cases from Xingshi yan, Xingshi hengyan, and Pai'an jingqi, it asks how garments, shoes, hair arrangements, ornaments, and underclothes enter narrative action. Rather than treating dress as a static marker of status or ritual propriety, the paper follows scenes in which clothing is worn down, layered, stitched, withheld, disordered, or stripped away. Three arguments structure the analysis. First, deteriorated or insufficient clothing registers the first signs of social decline and bodily vulnerability. Second, carefully arranged mourning or death-related dress organizes emotion and prepares the female body for moral recognition before death occurs. Third, public humiliation is produced through the dismantling of the dressed body, as ornaments, hair, robes, skirts, shoes, and bindings are removed before a judging crowd. The paper argues that clothing constitutes the social surface of the female body: when that surface is damaged, denied, or over-arranged, suffering becomes visible, legible, and morally consequential. This approach reframes dress description in Ming vernacular fiction as a form of narrative action rather than decorative detail.

Keywords: Ming fiction, female dress, humiliation, chastity, bodily boundary, Xingshi yinyuan zhuan

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Introduction

In Ming vernacular fiction, clothing identifies characters with striking narrative economy. Silk, gauze, hemp, patched cloth, hair arrangements, shoes, ornaments, and undergarments can establish rank, gender, respectability, domestic position, and bodily vulnerability within a few words. Studies of dress and material culture in late imperial China have often emphasized clothing's relation to status, consumption, labor, and the regulation of visible distinction (Bray, 1997; Clunas, 1991; Finnane, 2008). Such approaches are indispensable for understanding how dress places characters in social space. They also leave a further question open: what happens when clothing does not stabilize position, but exposes its failure?

This question becomes especially important in scenes involving women. In the texts discussed here, a woman's altered circumstances rarely arrive only as narrative announcement. They appear first through textile detail and bodily presentation: an old skirt begins to trail, a pair of shoes no longer supports the body, a jacket becomes patched and earth-stained, a woman preparing for death layers and stitches garments around herself, or a crowd tears away ornaments, hair, shoes, and underclothes. In these moments, dress description does more than record what a figure wears. It participates in the making of decline, shame, chastity, death, and social exposure.

The article therefore treats clothing as a bodily boundary and a narrative medium. Turner's essay on "the social skin" offers a useful point of departure because it locates social identity at the surface of the body, in ornamentation, modification, and covering (Turner, 1980). Clothing in the scenes examined here functions in this sense as a social surface: it mediates between the body and the surrounding world. When this surface is worn down, withheld, disturbed, or stripped away, the disturbance is also social and moral. It changes how the woman is seen, judged, and placed within family, household, ritual, or public space.

The analysis centers on *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan*, a seventeenth-century vernacular novel associated with the late Ming and early Qing narrative world, and places it in dialogue with selected scenes from *Xingshi yan*, *Xingshi hengyan*, and the *Pai'an jingqi* collections. The examples are selected by action rather than by garment type. The discussion focuses on moments when clothing is dragged, layered, stitched, withheld, changed, loosened, stripped, or discarded. This emphasis on action prevents clothing from becoming a loose symbol and keeps the analysis tied to narrative movement.

Three sections follow. The first reads worn, insufficient, or withheld garments as early signs of suffering. The second turns to clothing as emotional and ritual exposure in scenes of death, sorrow, and shame. The third examines public humiliation through costume, makeup, ornaments, hair, and the dismantling of the dressed body. Together, these sections argue that Ming vernacular fiction repeatedly uses clothing to make gendered suffering material, visible, and socially consequential.

Clothing as the First Sign of Suffering

Clothing in these narratives often marks the earliest visible moment of decline. A woman's loss of position is not always stated directly. It may first be registered through texture, fit, weight, movement, and the relation between body and garment. A person remains clothed, yet the clothing no longer supports the social form that previously held her in place.

A telling instance appears in chapter eight of *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan*, where Zhengē is described after losing her former force within the household. She wears an everyday raw-gauze jacket, an old moon-white silk skirt, and a pair of worn shoes that trail at her feet. The passage does not present sudden destitution. Instead, deterioration accumulates in small movements. The jacket has retreated into domestic ordinariness; the skirt has grown old; the shoes no longer carry the body with composure. What matters is not the age of the garments alone, but the loss of arrangement. Dress no longer lifts the body into the position it once occupied.

The scene gains force because traces of the former position remain. Zhengē is not represented as wholly stripped of status. Her clothing still carries residual refinement: gauze, silk, and a color associated with delicate textile taste. Yet these elements no longer compose an effective social appearance. The old skirt and trailing shoes suggest a body whose former authority has become difficult to sustain. Status has not yet disappeared; the bodily surface that sustained it has begun to loosen.

Chapter twenty-seven presents a socially lower form of sartorial suffering. A farmer's wife appears in half-new, half-old blue cloth trousers, white knee-trousers coarse and earth-stained, muddy leg wrappings, cloth shoes, and a small patched blue jacket. The description draws the woman downward through textile texture. Blue cloth, white knee coverings, mud, and patching do not simply indicate poverty. They place her body close to work, ground, and bodily fatigue. The clothing covers the body while also showing how thoroughly it has been marked by labor.

Bray's work on gender and textile labor in late imperial China is helpful here because it reminds us that cloth was deeply bound to household labor, gendered production, and moral order (Bray, 1997). In this fictional passage, that economy appears not as a general social category, but as worn fabric, dirty binding, and bodily heaviness. The farmer's wife is still dressed, but her dress no longer produces distinction. It records a body pressed into the material conditions of work.

Chapter seventy-nine moves from poverty to deliberate punishment. A concubine withholds warm clothing from a maidservant in winter, refusing to give her cotton or cloth and leaving her in an unpadded jacket and torn trousers. The cold is not incidental. It is produced through the denial of textile protection. Cloth, cotton, and padded garments become instruments through which another woman's body is managed and made to suffer.

This example clarifies a larger point. The lower limit of clothing often marks the lower limit of protection. To withhold padded trousers and a padded jacket is to determine how much cold the body must endure. Domestic hierarchy becomes tactile and thermal: it is felt as exposure, thinness, and the absence of insulation. In such scenes, suffering is measured not only by beating, verbal abuse, or narrative condemnation, but by the amount of cloth allowed to remain between body and environment.

These cases show different forms of decline. Zhengē's worn skirt and trailing shoes register the loosening of former household authority. The farmer's wife's patched clothing records long bodily wear under labor and poverty. The maidservant's thin winter garments show how clothing can be withheld as punishment. In all three scenes, dress is the first place where social position becomes unstable. Suffering enters the narrative through fabric before it is fully explained by plot.

Clothing as Emotional Exposure: Sorrow, Shame, and Loss

If the previous section examines clothing as an early sign of descent, this section turns to scenes in which disrupted, excessive, or ritualized dress gives emotion a public form. Sorrow, shame, and loss are not presented as purely inward states. They become legible through mourning clothes, hemp garments, disordered hair, stained costume, stripped ornaments, exposed shoes, and damaged bodily surfaces. Clothing organizes emotion by giving it a form that others can see and judge.

In *Xingshi yan*, a chaste-wife narrative presents a woman condemned by the demands of chastity and household obligation. Before announcing her inability to continue serving her parents-in-law, she bathes, dresses in hemp clothing, enters the hall, and prostrates herself. The sequence matters: bathing, dressing, entering, bowing, speaking. The narration does not present grief as uncontrolled outburst. It places grief into bodily order.

Because the woman remains alive, the hemp clothing is not ordinary mourning dress. It anticipates death rather than responding to it. Kutcher's study of mourning in late imperial China shows how mourning was organized through bodily comportment, material signs, and graded obligations of grief (Kutcher, 1999). In this scene, hemp clothing moves the living body toward a future moral status. It places the woman at a threshold between daughter-in-law and chaste martyr, between household service and posthumous recognition. Death has not yet occurred, but clothing has already begun to organize the body as one that will be mourned and judged.

A related but more extreme scene appears in chapter nine of *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan*. Before suicide, Ji shi dresses herself in multiple layers: silver-red padded trousers, an embroidered white silk skirt, a moon-white underjacket, a sky-blue short coat, a silver-red silk robe, a moon-white satin outer robe, and a sky-blue wide-sleeved gown. These garments are then fastened with needle and thread. The scene is marked by excessive order. The body about to die is layered, sealed, and secured.

This careful dressing should not be mistaken for recovery. Ji shi does not regain her former household position, nor does the narrative undo the hierarchy that has displaced her. What the scene secures is the form in which her body will later be seen, remembered, and judged. The needle and thread do not merely fasten clothing. They fix the body into a final social and moral shape. In life, her position has become unstable. Before death, she attempts to compose a body that cannot be reduced to disorder or disgrace.

The same logic also operates in reverse, through the premature removal of mourning signs. In another episode from *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan*, after the burial of her scholar husband, a wife removes the hemp rope, mourning clothes, paper mourning band, and white mourning hairstyle, throws them onto the grave, and immediately changes into ornamental clothing, cosmetics, and floral adornment. The force of the scene lies in the abrupt movement from mourning white to decorative color. Dress here exposes not sorrow, but the refusal of sorrow.

The passage suggests that emotional exposure can arise from absence as much as presence. Mourning dress marks the body as bound to grief, widowhood, and ritual obligation. Casting those signs onto the grave and replacing them too quickly with ornamental clothing breaks the expected continuity between death, sorrow, and bodily restraint. Redressing in this case does

not repair disorder. It discloses moral dissonance through the speed and direction of sartorial change.

Shame becomes visible through a different form of clothing action: the deliberate making of a woman into a public spectacle. Chapter fifty-seven of *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* records such a calculated act of sartorial theater. Seeking to pressure his clan over housing and land, Mr. Chao coats his wife's face heavily with white powder, draws thick black eyebrows, applies red clay across her lips, dresses her in a patchwork jacket and skirt of unequal lengths, straps a broken lute to her back, and leads her through a crowded marketplace to sing and beg for coins.

The humiliation is not spontaneous. It is assembled through dress, makeup, props, and movement through public space. Every element of respectable feminine presentation is distorted: powder becomes excessive, eyebrows crude, lips garish, garments discordant, and musical performance degraded into street begging. The woman becomes a visible instrument through which clan face is pressured. Her body carries an injury directed beyond herself.

Goffman's account of stigma helps clarify why visibility matters in this scene: social identity depends on the management of what is visible and to whom (Goffman, 1963). Ahmed's discussion of shame as an emotion that moves through bodily surfaces and social encounters is also relevant (Ahmed, 2004). Shame in this episode does not remain inside the wife as private feeling. It is produced through powder, clay, cloth, instrument, street, and crowd. The clan's eventual capitulation shows that the humiliation attaches to household reputation as well as to the woman's body.

Loss appears most violently when clothing and bodily ornaments are taken away. Chapter seventy-three of *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* records an assault at a temple fair in which women are seized by men who take their hairpins and rings, pull down their hair buns, seize their robes, strip off their skirts and trousers, and remove shoes and foot wrappings. The sequence is crucial. Hairpins and rings mark feminine respectability and marital status; their removal begins the undoing of social identity before the body is fully exposed. The hair bun holds the head in a disciplined form; pulling it down converts bodily arrangement into visible disorder. The removal of robes, skirts, trousers, shoes, and foot wrappings then moves the assault from humiliation into bodily violation.

The final details intensify the destruction of bodily boundary. Foot wrappings and embroidered shoes belong to one of the most culturally elaborated and intimate zones of the late imperial female body. Their removal is not an additional stage of undressing. It dismantles the protected surface through which feminine privacy and propriety are maintained. The body is not merely unclothed. It is left visibly damaged, with the surface that made it socially recognizable destroyed.

Read together, these scenes show that emotion in Ming vernacular fiction is repeatedly made legible through clothing. Hemp clothing disciplines sorrow before death. Layered and stitched garments compose a body for posthumous recognition. Premature redressing exposes the refusal of grief. Grotesque costume manufactures shame before a crowd. Stripped ornaments, loosened hair, missing shoes, and removed foot wrappings materialize loss. Clothing is therefore not a passive sign of feeling. It is the medium through which feeling is organized, displayed, judged, and made socially consequential.

Public Exposure, Bodily Boundary, and Narrative Consequence

The preceding examples point to a broader narrative logic. Clothing in these scenes does not function as isolated detail. It works by changing the body's boundary. To wear, loosen, layer, withhold, stain, or remove a garment is to alter the relation between body and social world. This alteration has consequences: it changes the body's moral status, the direction of spectatorship, and the way the scene can be remembered.

The dressed female body in these narratives is never simply private. Hair arrangements, earrings, robes, skirts, trousers, shoes, and foot bindings all mark degrees of propriety, kinship, marital status, bodily discipline, and household belonging. When these elements are preserved, the body remains socially legible. When they are disturbed, the body is pushed toward uncertainty, shame, or vulnerability. This is why the temple-fair assault depends on sequence, and why the street humiliation scene depends on carefully assembled costume. The narrative needs not only a woman in distress, but a visible transformation of her bodily surface.

This logic also explains why redressing sometimes appears as repair. A woman who has been stripped, made ragged, denied clothing, or forced into humiliating costume has lost more than appearance. She has lost the protective surface through which social identity is maintained. To re-order hair, replace ornaments, or restore proper clothing is to recover at least part of the condition under which the body can be read as respectable or kin-bound.

Yet the scenes examined here also show the limits of restoration. Ji shi's carefully composed death-dress restores form, not life. The chaste woman's hemp clothing prepares moral recognition, not ordinary domestic continuity. The punished maidservant's thin winter clothing exposes bodily control rather than offering repair. In these cases, clothing may stabilize a final image, but it cannot undo the violence, hierarchy, or loss that made such stabilization necessary.

The narrative consequence is therefore double. Clothing reveals suffering, and it gives suffering a form through which others may judge it. The same surface that protects the body can also expose it; the same garment that marks respectability can become evidence of collapse; the same act of dressing can prepare the body for death rather than life. Ming vernacular fiction repeatedly uses this tension to turn female suffering into something material and socially legible.

Conclusion

The scenes examined in this paper show that clothing in Ming vernacular fiction is an active medium through which suffering becomes visible. Worn skirts, patched jackets, withheld padded garments, hemp mourning clothes, carefully stitched death-dress, grotesque costume, stripped ornaments, loosened hair, missing shoes, and removed foot wrappings all mark changes in a woman's social and bodily condition. They do not simply describe what a character wears. They organize how her body is seen, judged, exposed, or remembered.

Three sartorial movements structure these narratives. First, deteriorated or insufficient clothing marks the entry into suffering, making poverty, decline, and punishment visible on the surface of the body. Second, ritualized or disrupted dress gives sorrow, shame, and loss a public form. Mourning clothes discipline grief; premature redressing discloses moral dissonance; grotesque costume manufactures shame; stripping and the removal of ornaments destroy bodily

boundaries. Third, acts of redressing or careful arrangement may recover social recognizability, but they often do so under conditions where ordinary repair is impossible.

Reading these scenes through clothing as a bodily boundary clarifies why dress description matters so strongly in Ming vernacular fiction. The female body becomes socially legible through garments, hair, shoes, ornaments, and textile layers. When that surface is damaged, denied, or rearranged by others, suffering becomes public. When it is restored, even partially, the narrative regains a moral frame through which the body can be understood. Clothing therefore becomes one of the main ways Ming fiction materializes suffering and imagines the ethical consequences of social disorder.

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