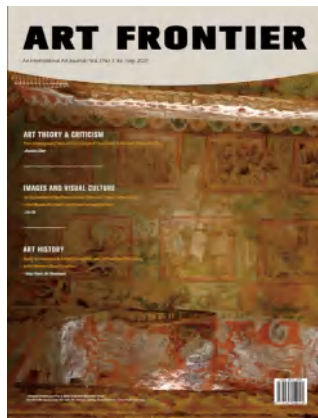




ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal/Vol. 3, No. 3 (Total Issue No. 10) Published: 2025-06-30

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To cite this article: Liu Ge "A Study on the Phenomenon of Women Wearing Men's Attire in the Wall Paintings of Tang Dynasty Tomb of Li Xian", At Frontier 3, no.3 (Sep.2025). DOI: [HTTPS://DOLORG/ 10.64212/UAHY7597](https://DOLORG/10.64212/UAHY7597)

DOI: [HTTPS://DOLORG/ 10.64212/UAHY7597](https://DOLORG/10.64212/UAHY7597)

ISSN: 2835-5490

EISSN: 2836-841X

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This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

Website: <https://www.cafrontierpress.org/>

Email: editorial2023@artfrontier.org

Publishing Frequency: Quarterly (March, June, September, December)



A Study on the Phenomenon of Women Wearing Men's Attire in the Wall Paintings of Tang Dynasty Tomb of Li Xian

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Abstract

The Hui Mausoleum (the Tomb of Prince Li Xian, the Emperor Rang of the Tang Dynasty), excavated in 2000, is a high-ranking burial constructed in the 29th year of the Kaiyuan reign (741 AD) under the special Tang institution of elevating a tomb to the status of an imperial mausoleum. Its murals covering the tomb passage, tunnels and passageway are well-preserved and feature abundant human figures. Among these murals, multiple depictions feature female figures dressed in male official robes and wearing futou head coverings. Their compositional arrangements, spatial distribution and functional attributes reflect a highly systematic design. Scholars generally hold that murals depicting female figures in male robes can be regarded both as a manifestation of the diversification of women's costumes in the Tang Dynasty and as ritual garments with special functional significance deployed in tombs to meet the demands of funerary etiquette. When examining the murals of female attendants in male robes in the Tomb of Li Xian, this paper further analyzes gender perceptions, ritual systems and funerary beliefs of the High Tang period through an investigation of their costumes, facial makeup and ritual functions within the tomb space.

Keywords

Tomb chamber murals, Tomb of Li Xian of the Tang Dynasty, images of women wearing male attire, funeral rituals

In early October 1999, the southern side of the burial mound of the Hui Mausoleum, located in Sanhe Village, Sanhe Township, approximately 4.5 km northwest of the Pucheng County seat, Shaanxi Province, was looted using explosives. The resulting robbery pit reached a depth of about 9 m. Upon receiving the news, the Shaanxi Provincial Cultural Heritage Bureau immediately assigned the Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology to conduct a preliminary investigation and protection of the tomb and reported the incident to the National Cultural Heritage Administration. A rescue excavation was subsequently carried out from March 2000 to January 2001. The

tomb is situated on the Weibei tableland. It is a single-brick-chamber tomb with a long sloping passageway, oriented north-south. It consists of a burial mound, passageway (mudao), tunnel sections (guodong), shaft openings (tianjing), wall niches (bikan), a passageway (yongdao), and a burial chamber (mushi), with a total length of approximately 60 m. Exquisite murals were painted on the eastern and western walls of the passageway, tunnel sections, and shaft openings, as well as above the entrance to the passageway.

1. The Burial Structure of Li Xian's Tomb and Images of Women in Male Attire Found Within

The Book of Rites - Internal Regulations states "Men and women do not share the same articles of clothing."¹This strictly delineated the boundaries of male and female attire at the level of ritual law. Although instances of women adopting male clothing are not uncommon in history, except during the Tang Dynasty, such cases were more often exceptions in other periods. A detailed reading of the murals in Li Xian's tomb reveals that female attendants wearing male attire constitute half of the total number of serving women depicted, indicating that women wearing male clothing were highly popular during the Xuanzong era. As Li Xian's tomb was constructed during the High Tang period, analysis of the phenomenon of women in male attire visible in its murals demonstrates the prevalence of this artistic fashion and its expression in art at that time.

The total surface area of the murals excavated from Li Xian's tomb is approximately 250 m², distributed across the eastern, western, and northern walls of the passageway; the eastern and western walls of the tunnel sections and shaft openings; the eastern and western walls and ceiling of the passageway; and the four walls and dome ceiling of the burial chamber. Except for the northern parts of the eastern and western walls of the passageway and the northern parts of the eastern and western walls of the passageway, which are poorly preserved, the remaining sections are generally in good condition.²This paper will describe the images of women in male attire within the murals of Li Xian's tomb, following the progressively inward spatial sequence from the

passageway, through the tunnel sections and shaft openings, to the passageway, and finally to the burial chamber. Based on this burial spatial structure, a detailed reading of the images reveals the occurrence of women in male attire serving different functions at different locations within the tomb. No images of women in male attire were found in the passageway. Proceeding inward to the tunnel sections and shaft openings, the first and second tunnel sections also yielded no such images. However, the eastern and western walls of the first and second shaft openings each depict female attendants in male attire. The passageway section of the tomb has a total length of 20 m; its eastern and western walls each bear twenty-eight painted figures, making a total of fifty-six female attendants. Among these fifty-six attendants, a large number are depicted in male attire. Specifically, there are eight female attendants in male attire on the eastern wall of the passageway and seven on the western wall. Furthermore, one female attendant in male attire appears on each of the eastern and northern walls of the burial chamber.

On the eastern and western walls of the first and second shaft openings, the two northernmost figures in each case are women wearing male attire. They wear belts at the waist and stand with hands clasped in front, clearly holding official positions. The depictions of female attendants on the eastern and western walls of the first shaft opening each show three female attendants arranged vertically, their bodies presenting a solemn, waiting posture. Among them, the first female attendant from the left on the eastern wall is in male attire. She wears a round-necked robe with wide sleeves and a futou headdress, with hands concealed within sleeves. She is attired in a red round-necked robe with tight sleeves, secured at the waist by a leather belt, and wears black boots. The posture and attire of the third female attendant from the left on the western wall, who is also a woman in male attire, are highly similar to those of the figure on the eastern wall (figure 1). In the second shaft opening, the female attendants in male attire are located as the first figure from the left on the eastern wall and the third figure from the left on the western wall. Their posture and attire show no major differences from the female attendants in male attire on the eastern and western walls of the first shaft opening (figure 2).



Figure 1. Female attendants in male attire on the eastern wall of the first shaft opening (left); female attendants in male attire on the western wall of the first shaft opening (right).



Figure 2. Female attendants in male attire on the eastern wall of the second shaft opening (left); female attendants in male attire on the western wall of the second shaft opening (right).

Within the passageway, a female attendant in male attire is located as the ninth figure from the south on the eastern wall. She wears a yellow round-collared Hu-style robe and a futou headdress, holding a round fan in her hand. On the western wall of the passageway is a depiction of female attendants, showing the eighth and ninth attendants from the southern end among the twenty-eight female figures. The attendant on the left has dense hair, coiffed into a single high chignon that tilts forward. Her facial features are delicate. She wears a yellow cross-collared upper garment (ru) and a long, tucked-bosom pleated skirt in an earthy yellow hue. A white sash from the skirt is visible, draping down at the front of her chest. A light green long shawl (peibo) is draped across her chest and over both shoulders, falling down her back. Her hands are concealed within her sleeves and crossed in front of her chest. The attendant on the right is dressed in male attire, wearing a black futou headdress with soft flaps and a white, round-collared, long robe, secured at the waist by a belt. She holds a lidded lacquer box with a truncated pyramidal (luding) cover with both hands in front of her chest (figure 3).



Figure 3. Female attendants in male attire on the eastern wall of the passageway (left); female attendants in male attire on the western wall of the passageway (right).

Images of women in male attire within the burial chamber appear on the eastern wall and the eastern side of the northern wall. Located on the eastern wall of the burial chamber, north of the music and dance performance scene, is a depiction of a

noblewoman and her attendants observing the performance. The central figure is seated. She has dense hair, styled into a high chignon on top of her head. She wears a light green upper garment (ru) and a yellow shawl (peibo) draped over her shoulders. Her tucked-bosom long skirt is also an earthy yellow color. She holds a long-handled oval round fan in her right hand, suggesting that she likely represents the tomb's female occupant; her sitting height is approximately 162 centimeters. On her left side, there is a female attendant standing, and on her right side, there are two female attendants standing side by side. On the right rear position of the tomb owner, there is a male attendant in formal attire, wearing a cap, wearing a round-necked long-sleeved robe, and holding a fan. This indicates that this male attendant is not an ordinary servant, and might be a female official simulating the situation in the court. These female officials were responsible for managing various affairs in the imperial harem and had certain ranks and identities.³ On the eastern section of the northern wall of the burial chamber is a depiction of female attendants, composed of six figures arranged in a row. The first figure, located at the far eastern end of the group (the first from the right in the image), is a female attendant dressed in male attire. She wears a black futou headdress with soft flaps, with one flap draped over her left shoulder, although only the outline is drawn without added color. Her face is full, with rouge applied to her cheeks; the lines of her facial features are blurred. She wears a yellow, round-collared long robe. The depiction of her waist and legs is missing. Her hands are concealed within her sleeves and held together in front of her chest. This attendant in male attire sits respectfully beside the other female attendants in conventional dress. She holds no objects that clearly indicate her status, and her overall appearance is relatively ordinary (figure 4).

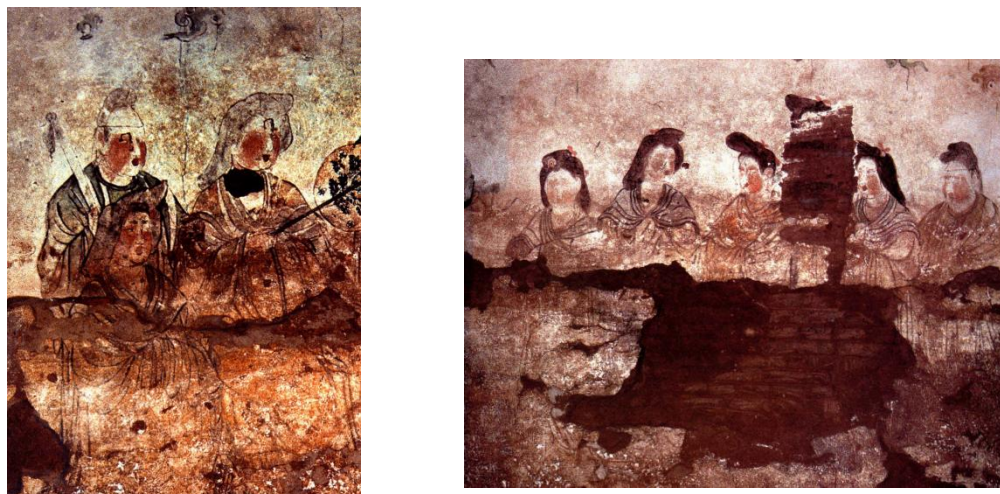


Figure 4. Noblewoman and music and dance scene on the eastern wall of the burial chamber (left); female attendants on the northern wall of the burial chamber (right).

2. Analysis of Details in the Depictions of Women in Male Attire in the Murals of Li Xian's Tomb

2.1. Differences Between Images of Women in Male Attire and Common Male Attire Imagery

The clothing system for Tang Dynasty men is clearly recorded in the *Comprehensive Institutions*: “For men, the round-collared robe is customary attire; those of the fifth rank and above wear purple, while those of the sixth rank and below wear crimson and green.”⁴ However, the characteristics of the attire worn by women in male dress in the murals of Li Xian's tomb present features that diverge from these codified regulations.⁵

A detailed analysis of the images reveals that although the robes of these female attendants in male attire employ different colors such as red, yellow, and white, there is no clear correspondence to the official rank-color system—for instance, red here is not exclusive to high-ranking officials. More crucially, the leather belts they wear all have black belt plaques (*dai kua*), which form a sharp contrast to the system where Tang Dynasty male officials used the number of plaques to indicate their rank. Furthermore, the *futou* headdresses they wear are all of the soft-flag type, distinctly different from the hard-flag *futou* commonly seen on Tang ceremonial guards and military officials.

(figures 5, 6). Soft-flag futou, as the name implies, has “flags” made of soft silk fabric without any internal rigid framework. Consequently, the two flags hang down naturally or flutter freely with the wearer’s movement, creating a very natural and flowing appearance. In contrast, hard-flag futou are made by inserting rigid materials (such as iron wire, bamboo slivers, or tung wood strips) inside the soft flags as a skeleton, making the two flags stiff and extending them straight out horizontally to the sides. These characteristics fully show that the depiction of women in male attire in the murals does not constitute a complete imitation of official male court dress, but rather is a visual presentation of an imitation of male everyday attire.⁶



Figure 5. Futou headdress in the images of women in male attire from the tomb of Tang Li Xian.



Figure 6. Futou headdress in the images of guards from the tomb of Tang Prince Zhanghuai.

It is particularly noteworthy that these depictions of women in male attire, while imitating men’s clothing, retain distinct feminine characteristics in numerous details. Taking the scene of the noblewoman and the music and dance performance north of the

performance scene on the eastern wall of the burial chamber as an example, the female attendant in male attire positioned behind and to the right of the principal female tomb occupant, although wearing a futou headdress and a round-collared robe with wide sleeves, has facial makeup identical to that of the surrounding skirt-clad attendants. This includes the application of rouge over a large area of the cheeks and vermilion on the lips, fully conforming to the typical aesthetic of Tang women's "red makeup." This phenomenon is even more fully expressed in the line engravings on the stone outer coffin of Li Xian's tomb (figure 7). In one engraving a fan-holding attendant, beneath her futou, clearly displays a circular floral yue symbolizing feminine adornment on her forehead. Another attendant, depicted with hands crossed (chashou), not only has a floral yue on her forehead but also wears an exquisite floral hair ornament inserted directly into her black futou.⁷ This decorative technique of "male attire as the exterior, women's makeup as the interior" can also be found as evidence in other tomb art of the Tang Dynasty. For instance, the male attendant in the mural of Empress Wei's tomb wore a round-neck robe while also having red makeup on her face (figure 8). These examples collectively indicate that the male attendants in Tang Dynasty costumes were not merely imitating men, but rather demonstrated the meticulous thoughts unique to women in the details of their makeup.⁸



Figure 7. Li Xian's tomb relief depicting a male attendant in formal attire.

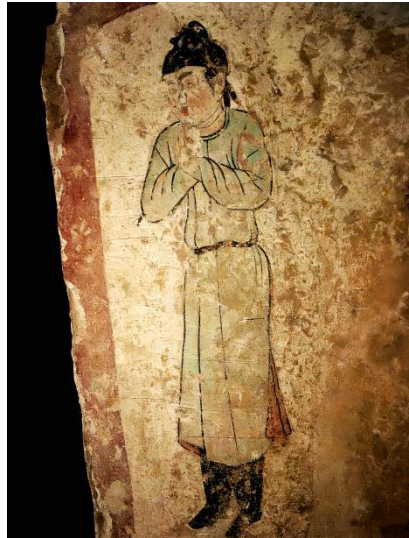


Figure 8. Male attendant depicted in the tomb mural of Empress Tang Weigui

2.2 Images of women dressed as men in different positions within the tomb chamber

Scholars within China's archaeological community share a fundamental consensus regarding ancient burials, especially high-ranking tombs dating to the Han and Tang dynasties: the tomb constitutes a miniature replica of the occupant's earthly residence, and even a microcosm of the entire universe. This theory was systematically expounded in Wu Hong's *Art in the Underworld: Macroscopic Ancient Chinese Tombs*. Wu Hong pointed out that the tomb space is a "afterlife home" constructed for the deceased, and its structure, images, and burial objects jointly express a "microcosm" (a miniature version of the universe).⁹ We can draw a conclusion from this point. Tomb murals do not serve merely as random decorations. Ancient designers arranged these murals in specific positions following a well-planned layout. Designers created such murals to build a space with complete narrative logic. This space leads visitors to move step by step. Visitors first pass areas for public rituals, and finally reach the innermost private living quarters. I have discussed the female figures in men's costumes from Li Xian's Tomb in detail in the previous part. We can clearly count four groups of such images in total. These images spread across many parts of the tomb. They cover the east and west walls of the first and second courtyards, the two side walls of the passageway, and the eastern and northern walls of the burial chamber. We can see a considerable

number of these preserved motifs. We can refer to the overall spatial structure of Li Xian's Tomb. These cross-dressing female images placed in different tomb locations carry different symbolic meanings respectively.

The courtyards within the tomb structure mimic the multi-entry courtyard layout of the tomb owner's residential mansion in life. According to the tomb plan in the archaeological report, beyond the passageway one encounters the tunnel sections (guodong) and shaft openings distributed in sequence. The first shaft opening represents the first courtyard space entered after the passageway, symbolizing the outer court or entrance courtyard of the estate. This area serves as the boundary between the interior of the tomb and the external world, a place where honor guards and sentinels were stationed. Consequently, the eastern and western walls of the first shaft opening typically feature large-scale processional scenes of ceremonial guards. The second shaft opening represents a similar space and will not be elaborated on here. The *Excavation Report on the Tomb of Tang Prince Yide* provides detailed records of the ceremonial guard configurations in shaft opening murals, where the number of figures and types of weapons correspond to Tang Dynasty ceremonial guard regulations.¹⁰ In contrast, the female attendants in male attire on the walls of the first and second shaft openings in Li Xian's tomb wear round-collared robes with wide sleeves and futou headdresses. Their hands are gathered within their sleeves, held overlapping in front of their bodies, and concealed within the sleeves. This posture represents a standing gesture conveying respect, quietude, and dignified composure. This respectful standing posture is identical to the dignified demeanor expected of the ceremonial guard and sentry figures typically found in this location, indicating that the identity of the depicted figures does not change because of their gender.

The passageway (yongdao) connects the symbolic outer court (represented by the shaft openings) and the inner chambers (the burial chamber), imitating the covered walkways that linked courtyards with main halls in a residential compound. This space is a key transitional zone from the public to the private sphere. In Qi Dongfang's *Sui and Tang Archaeology*, when discussing Tang mural tombs, it is pointed out that the human figures in passageway murals place greater emphasis on a "serving function"

and “domestic nature,” forming a clear contrast with the “ceremonial and guard function” of the passageway and shaft opening murals, thus clearly marking the spatial transition.¹¹The east wall of the passageway is regularly painted with civil officials, palace eunuchs, or groups of palace maids. These figures hold a higher rank than the ceremonial guards depicted in the courtyards; they symbolize personal attendants serving within the mansion and subordinate civil officials handling daily administrative affairs. For instance, the passageway of the Tomb of Prince Zhanghuai of the Tang Dynasty is decorated with numerous palace maids holding parcels, candlesticks and other utensils, depicting scenes of servants attending to the inner residential quarters (figures 9, 10). The murals on the west wall of the passageway often echo or form a symmetrical counterpart to those on the east wall; alternatively, they may depict military officers or another retinue of attendants. Together, they form a complete service system, as if guiding the soul of the tomb occupant into the inner chambers. From this, it can be seen that the core function of the passageway murals is to signify the transition from outer to inner, with their figures emphasizing a serving function and domestic nature. In Li Xian's tomb, whether it is the female attendant in male attire holding a round fan on the eastern wall or the one holding a lacquered box on the western wall, their core identity remains that of female attendants. The objects they hold—the round fan and the lacquered box—are items serving the domestic life of the inner household.



Figure 9. Female attendant carrying a pot on the eastern wall of the front passageway in the Tomb of Tang Prince Zhanghuai (left).



Figure 10. Female attendant holding a potted plant on the southern end of the eastern

wall of the front passageway in the Tomb of Tang Prince Zhanghuai (right).

The burial chamber is the core of the entire tomb complex, symbolizing the tomb occupant's private resting palace and eternal home in the afterlife. The following narrative focuses on the female attendant in male attire holding a hu tablet. Inside the burial chamber, the thematic focus of the murals shifts entirely to private, domestic, and leisurely scenes of daily life. The eastern wall of the burial chamber is commonly adorned with music and dance performances, feast scenes, or decorative screen paintings featuring flowers and birds. Prince Li Xian's burial chamber is an extremely private and luxurious closed space. A female maid dressed in men's robes stands on its eastern wall. She holds a ceremonial hu ban tablet in her hands. This detail greatly lifts the symbolic meaning of the mural. The hu ban was an important ritual tool for Tang officials. They used it to present written reports and follow court rules when meeting the emperor. The tablet itself stands for official authority and bureaucratic status in tangible form. Distinct from the service-oriented female attendants painted on the passageway walls, this figure demonstrates a functional shift from menial daily service to the regulation, maintenance and administration of affairs within the inner palace quarters. Standing slightly behind and beside the female tomb occupant, she occupies the standard position reserved for trusted confidantes and senior subordinate officials. Her figure precisely emulates the ranked female palace officials who administered imperial harem affairs in the Tang court. Tasked with coordinating the ongoing musical and dance performances and supervising the rest of the female attendants, she acts as the executive who safeguards the orderly operation of this eternal afterlife residence. Analysis of the burial chamber's spatial context and the images of women in male attire found within it confirms that it is their specific spatial location and ritual function that dictate their attire, and not the other way around.¹²

3. Examining the Phenomenon of Women in Male Attire in the Murals of Li Xian's Tomb through the Lens of the Closed System of Mortuary Ritual

In Wei Lu's master's thesis, "An Archaeological Observation of the Phenomenon of Women Wearing Male Attire in Tang Dynasty Tombs," after compiling archaeological data on depictions of women in male attire from Tang tombs and analyzing the status of the tomb occupants, it was found that—whether in material or pictorial form—such images of women in male attire are found exclusively in higher-specification tombs belonging to occupants of eminent status.

3.1 Images of Women in Male Attire within the Tomb Murals under this Burial System

As a special burial categorized as a tomb designated as a mausoleum (*hao mu wei ling*), the core principle of Li Xian's mortuary system was to recreate and solidify the social identity and hierarchical order held by the tomb occupant during his lifetime by strictly adhering to ritual institutions through this final spatial context. The concept of a "tomb designated as a mausoleum" implies that the tomb space was conceived as a scaled-down imperial city, and the murals within it must serve this central idea.¹³ As the Hui Mausoleum of the Emperor Rang, Li Xian's tomb features a sequence of spaces—the passageway, tunneled passages (*guodong*), and light wells (*tianjing*)—which, within the planning of the burial system, were designed to symbolize the ceremonial pathways and palace courtyards of the outer court area of the imperial palace. The function of the murals was to fill this space, thereby transforming it into a fully functional ritual setting.

Within this institutionalized space, the primary attribute of all depicted figures is their ritual function, not their biological sex. Areas such as the tomb passageway and light wells required the arrangement of ceremonial processions and retinues symbolizing imperial majesty. In reality, these roles were predominantly filled by men. However, owing to the open social environment, prosperous economic conditions, and the relatively high degree of tolerance toward women in Tang society, female attendants were present in practical life. For instance, the female attendants in male attire depicted on the eastern and western walls of the passageway in Li Xian's tomb exhibit postures and expressions that convey the ceremonial function of an honor guard. Confronted with the design requirement for a standardized honor guard, and given that the available

image prototypes or real-life models included a significant number of female attendants, the designers adopted a form of visual standardization. The mural designers chose to dress these female attendants in attire traditionally belonging to male ceremonial personnel—such as the futou headdress and round-collared robe. This served as the most visually intuitive means to express that the figure's function took precedence over gender. By changing into male attire, the ritual function of these female figures in the murals was emphasized to the greatest extent, directing the viewer's attention to what they represent (honor guards) rather than who they are (women). The mural has one core goal. It keeps the tomb standardized and orderly as a ritual venue. This mixed gender symbolic mode tells us a clear message. The painters did not want to turn female figures into real men. They only built a special ritual identity for the burial environment. This identity breaks the gender rules of daily life.

The painting delivers a straightforward message to readers. The people on guard for rituals in this area are still female servants. These servants just take over ceremonial roles that usually belong to men in ancient rituals.

3.2 Closed Funerary Ritual Cycle Formed by Women in Male Attire Motifs

We examine the female-in-male-attire murals in Li Xian's Tomb. These paintings appear on multiple walls. They cover the east and west walls of the first and second courtyards, the two walls of the passageway, and the east and north walls of the burial chamber. We can draw a clear conclusion from this analysis. These figures are not separate decorative patterns.

These murals make up a carefully planned visual ritual sequence. They work together to create a full, closed ritual system within the tomb. We have explained this point in the earlier analysis. The courtyards stand for the outer halls and gate areas of imperial palaces. They make up the outermost layer of the tomb space. This area carries the most prominent features of public activities, formal ceremonies and defensive functions. We see these female figures dressed in men's robes in this area, and they take the role of ritual guards. They line up beside male guards, and their main job is to guard the tomb and reflect the noble status of the tomb owner. The male-style costumes worn

by these women are first and foremost practical garments for the burial scene. The design also carries a hidden message, and it shows that women were not fully barred from the power system built for the tomb owner's afterlife. Women gained access to this system by adopting masculine attire, and they formed a small part of the visual display that highlights the tomb owner's authority.

This set of cross-dressing paintings starts the full ritual layout of the tomb. It shows how female servants walked into a ritual space long controlled only by male roles. The passageway links the outer courtyards and inner living rooms. It acts as the key connecting path between public areas and private rooms. This passageway stands for the route from outer courtyards to inner living spaces. Painters drew palace maids here with different jobs. They carried precious boxes like lacquer containers, led visitors around, and finished quick-response chores. These maids wore men's clothes for a clear reason. The outfit let them move freely and finish busy service work easily. This choice was not just about clothing style. It was a practical pick made to fit the real work needs inside the tomb. The *New Book of Tang* "Treatise on Carriages and Clothing" records: "After Emperor Zhongzong, palace women following the imperial carriage all wore Hu-style caps and rode horses. This was imitated throughout the land, to the extent that they galloped with their hair knots exposed, and the veiled hats were also abandoned. Some wore male clothing and boots, resembling the dress of the Xi and Khitan peoples."

¹⁴Among these, the palace women who "wore male clothing" were referred to in the Tang period as "head-wrapped inner personnel" (guotou neiren). Head-wrapped (guotou) refers to wearing male-style headwear such as the futou. Inner personnel (neiren) were palace women of relatively high rank who served within the palace confines. This indicates that women wearing male attire was an institutionalized dress code for specific, high-ranking groups of palace women. The female attendants serving within the passageway—this liminal space connecting inside and outside—and responsible for holding important items (like the lacquered case, which may have contained documents or seals), were necessarily trusted, close personal attendants of the tomb occupant. Their status was analogous to female officials such as the emperor's Directress of the Palace (Shang Gong) or Banquet Manager (Zhang Yan), far exceeding

that of ordinary palace maidens. Therefore, the images of the female attendants in male attire in the passageway of Li Xian's tomb most likely represent a truthful depiction of such high-ranking female officials or intimate attendants, the head-wrapped inner personnel, within the Tang imperial court. Their male garments carry dual attributes: practical convenience for physical movement and status differentiation. Distinguished from ordinary palace maids, these attendants likely held a superior rank. In this interstitial "in-between" space of the passageway, the motifs of Women in Male Attire perfectly visualize the concept of transition. These female figures change their roles from full-time ritual guards to working palace servants. Their duties also shift from symbolic tomb protection to real daily housekeeping inside the burial space. We can see a clear rule here. The deeper we go into the tomb's inner spaces, the more specific and practical these female characters' jobs become. They play an important guiding part. They lead the tomb owner's soul to travel from the public official area into the private living quarters of the tomb.

The burial chamber stands for the tomb owner's private bedroom and permanent resting place. It is the innermost and core area of the whole tomb structure. Here, the female attendant in male attire holding a hu tablet has her status elevated to that of a female official. The hu tablet was the core symbol of bureaucratic power in the Tang Dynasty. Positioned beside the principal female occupant within the scene of music and dance—the epitome of inner household pleasure—she acts as the manager and upholder of order for inner court affairs. Here, female attendants wearing male attire is no longer for convenience or identification but serves as the institutionalized uniform of inner court power. In this final setting of the burial chamber, the significance of the female attendants in male attire reaches its zenith. It is no longer merely about practicality or fashion; instead, it is absorbed and transformed by the mortuary ritual into a form of ceremonial dress or official robe, representing high-ranking power and status within the inner court. The male attire she wears symbolizes her high-ranking position within this microcosmic palace.

Li Xian's Tomb has three connected areas. It turns the real social custom of women wearing men's clothes into a complete set of visual rituals inside the tomb. The whole

moving path from the outer areas to the innermost room ends at the burial chamber. These female figures change their duties step by step with clear levels. They start as ritual guards who stand for public power. Next, they work as practical servants. In the end, they become court ladies with management rights for inner quarters. The closed ritual system works for one main purpose. It tells visitors, imagined gods and later people that Li Xian's Tomb forms an independent small world. This world runs under a complete and strict set of ritual rules. Painters use the design of men's robes for female characters. These female images show up in every part of the connected tomb space. They help confirm the highest position of Li Xian in his everlasting resting place.

4. Social Concepts of the High Tang Period Reflected in the Phenomenon of Women in Male Attire in the Murals of Li Xian's Tomb

4.1 The Phenomenon of Women in Male Attire in Li Xian's Tomb Under the Influence of Social Ideology

Constructed in the final year of the Kaiyuan reign, Li Xian's Tomb dates to the Kaiyuan period (713–741), a golden age of the Tang Dynasty and even of ancient Chinese history. This era was marked by clean governance, economic prosperity, flourishing culture, and remarkable social openness. The self-assurance, opulence and open ethos embodied in the tomb murals stand as a concentrated manifestation and the final swan song of the visual culture of the Kaiyuan Golden Age. Li Xian's Tomb stands as a highly representative high-ranking burial structure of the High Tang period, an era renowned for robust national strength. As Du Fu wrote in his poem: "Rice grains plump and glossy, millet grains pure white; granaries public and private all brim with plenty." The accumulation of material wealth laid the economic foundation for the pursuit of luxury and diversified sartorial fashions across society. Meanwhile, as a cosmopolitan empire, the Tang Dynasty witnessed mixed settlements of Han and ethnic Hu populations in cities such as Chang'an and Luoyang, where Hu music, Hu dances and Hu cuisine prevailed widely. Hu costumes originating from nomadic peoples, including round-collared robes, leather belts and tall boots, were valued for their mobility and heroic bearing. Favored by men, they also naturally became a fashionable option for

aristocratic women who valued freedom and ease of movement. The round-collared Hu robes worn by the female attendants in Li Xian's Tomb are a direct product of this aesthetic backdrop marked by the overwhelming prevalence of Hu cultural influences.¹⁵

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The unprecedented and unparalleled historical event of Wu Zetian ascending the throne as a female ruler during the High Tang Dynasty profoundly challenged the traditional patriarchal doctrine that prioritized men over women. Although the Wu Zhou regime had already collapsed, it subtly and imperceptibly elevated societal recognition of women's capabilities. The active participation of elite women in secular life laid the social groundwork for the representation of their masculinized and empowered images in tomb art.¹⁷ Funeral beliefs of the High Tang Dynasty adhered to the core principle of "treating the deceased as if they were alive". Tombs were regarded as the deceased's eternal dwelling in the afterlife. Ancient painters designed tomb murals to show real and ideal life scenes of the tomb owner as much as they could. Many noble maids and court ladies wore men's clothes in the imperial palace and wealthy families in Tang Dynasty. It was a widely accepted social habit at that time. Artists had to draw these familiar outfits on the murals. This way could build a real and believable living space for the tomb owner in the afterlife.

4.2 A Comparison of Female Figures Wearing Men's Robes in Li Xian's Tomb Murals and Surviving Aboveground Tang Artworks

Li Xian's Tomb was finished in the 29th year of Kaiyuan reign, which is 741 AD. People built this underground space as a permanent ritual place for the tomb owner's afterlife. The layout of female figures in men's robes shows fixed rules inside the tomb's painting system. These cross-dressing images mainly mark the ritual duties that the maids need to take on. Painters removed almost all personal features of these female attendants in men's clothes. They used unified poses and facial looks for every figure. These images no longer stand for real individual people. They only carry fixed ritual jobs, such as ritual guards, personal servants and court ladies. Artists placed these paintings in a set spatial order. The order stretches from the tomb passage straight to

the final burial chamber. We need to pay extra attention to their male outfits, especially the court ladies holding hu ban tablets inside the burial chamber. The hu ban tablet is a symbol of royal power. It adds official and rank meanings to men's costumes, following the rules of the Tang government system. It also reflects a clear inner power structure inside the small closed world made for the tomb owner.

Lady Guoguo's Spring Outing (figure 11) is a handscroll finished in the early Tianbao years. It was painted a short time after Li Xian's Tomb was built. The painting records real imperial life and shows this popular men's dressing style in daily civilian scenes. The scroll paints Lady Guoguo and her attendants riding horses across spring landscapes. Lady Guoguo was the third older sister of Yang Yuhuan, who was Emperor Xuanzong's favorite concubine in the Tang Dynasty. Researchers have discussed this question for a long time. They want to confirm which person in the painting is Lady Guoguo herself. Three widely accepted opinions have been put forward. The first one is the front female figure in white men's clothes. The second one is the woman in the middle who holds a baby. The third one is the guard at the back wearing male outfits.¹⁸ This uncertainty over the main figure actually supports the core viewpoint of this study. No matter which character represents Lady Guoguo, the scroll clearly shows many female figures wearing male costumes. This simple fact proves that cross-dressing was a common and ordinary dressing choice for noble women in public social activities during the High Tang period. These cross-dressing figures wear different types of futou headwear, bright round-collared robes and inner shirts. They also match leather waist belts and leather boots. This full set of clothing creates a neat, heroic and gender-neutral appearance. In this painting, the popular cross-dressing trend breaks the old ritual rule that men and women should have distinct costumes. It turns an unusual dressing habit into a mainstream social fashion. This social phenomenon reflects the extraordinary political influence of the Yang clan at that time. The powerful family dominated many aspects of social life, and clothing became a visible expression of its power. The male costumes in tomb murals only serve fixed ritual rules for the afterlife. In contrast, the noble ladies in this scroll wear men's costumes out of personal choice. This dressing preference shows that High Tang elite women pursued a freer and more convenient

daily lifestyle. It also reflects their subtle resistance to traditional female norms that restricted women to domestic inner chambers.¹⁹



Figure 11. Zhang Xuan, *Lady Guoguo's Spring Outing*, ink and color on silk, 52 × 148 cm, Tang dynasty, Liaoning Provincial Museum.

The completion of Li Xian's Tomb dates to 741, and *Lady Guoguo's Spring Outing* was created after 742. A clear difference in female cross-dressing imagery can be seen between these two types of artworks. Both works feature women wearing male costumes, yet these clothes carry distinct functions in different contexts. In tomb murals, male-style dresses serve as unified ritual uniforms and erase individual personal identities. In secular paintings, the same dressing style becomes a personalized fashion and symbolizes superior social status. These two chronological cases together illustrate the dual nature of High Tang cross-dressing culture. It complied with strict ritual rules for underground burial spaces and also prevailed as a popular lifestyle in earthly daily life.²⁰

Conclusion

The cross-dressing images in Li Xian's Tomb murals are not simple copies of popular clothing styles. They are not shallow decorative elements either. Instead, these artistic images deeply reflect High Tang social culture and recreate it to fit the unique ritual environment of the tomb. The tomb was built following the imperial mausoleum standard, which allowed nobles to adopt royal burial specifications. Tomb designers borrowed the prevailing female cross-dressing custom from real Tang society. They refined this popular social phenomenon and turned it into a complete ritual system that

supports the tomb's cosmic afterlife layout. Female cross-dressing figures form a full and closed ritual loop inside the tomb. From ritual guards in the outer courtyard, to working attendants along the passageway, and finally to court ladies in the burial chamber, these figures follow a clear inward spatial order. This visual sequence replicates the attendant system of the Tang royal court. It also skillfully solves the conflict between biological gender and practical ritual roles by using costume symbols. Dressing female attendants in male uniforms unifies the visual style of the tomb's ritual retinue. This design weakens the influence of gender differences on ritual duties. It further maintains the overall standardization and hierarchical order of the tomb's ritual space.

Li Xian's Tomb was built in the late prosperous years of the Kaiyuan era. Its murals of women in male attire fully capture the unique cultural features of the High Tang period. This visual motif reflects the open and inclusive social atmosphere shaped by widespread Hu cultural integration. It also shows the practical and flexible mindset of Tang people based on realistic needs. These mural images record the real social mobility and public participation of women in High Tang society. They also reveal how the aristocratic class used tomb construction to shape group identity through flexible and creative design. This tomb case clearly proves the vitality of the High Tang Dynasty. Such prosperity lied not only in its broad territory and thriving economy, but also in its inclusive cultural values and vivid, powerful visual art expressions.

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This article is a phase research achievement of the National Social Science Fund Art Project "Research on the Murals in Tombs Along the Great Wall from a Cross-Cultural Perspective" (Project Number: 23BF099) & "Postgraduate Education Reform and Quality Improvement Project of Henan Province" (YJS2026XSKC41).

Editor: Wang Jing

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