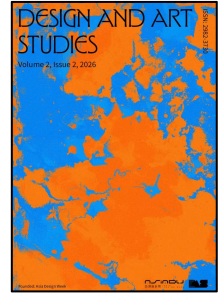




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Research Article

The Costume Image Design of Meng Ji, a Eunuch of the Imperial Household Manufactory in the Ming Dynasty: The Legendary Past Life of the Yongle-Era Gilt Bronze Statue of Guanyin

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Abstract

This paper adopts a method combining historical textual research and costume culture studies to explore the costume image design of Meng Ji, a eunuch of the Imperial Household Manufactory (*Yuyong jian*) in the Ming dynasty, as featured in "The Legendary Past Life of the Yongle-Era Gilt Bronze Statue of Guanyin" from Season 4 of *National Treasure*. The research specifically analyzes the costume design for Meng Ji in the context of this television feature, focusing on biographical and historical influences relevant to the Qutan Monastery in Qinghai during the Yongle reign, and draws on Ming dynasty dress regulations, surviving paintings, and excavated artifacts. Through a multi-faceted analysis of the style, color, fabric, patterns, and accessories of Meng Ji's attire, the paper examines how the costume design embodies Meng Ji's role as a trusted eunuch and agent of imperial authority in frontier affairs. This study aims to provide a new empirical case for historical costume research and to explore effective pathways for the modern dissemination of traditional culture.

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1. Introduction

National Treasure is a cultural heritage program produced by China Central Television (CCTV). It pioneered the "documentary variety show" format, integrating studio variety, documentary, and drama. Each episode focuses on a national-level museum, inviting celebrities as "*national treasure* guardians" to dramatically reenact the past and present lives of artifacts. This innovative format breaks from traditional heritage programs by reconstructing historical scenes and decoding cultural symbols, making cultural relics vivid and promoting traditional culture.

"The Legendary Past Life of the Yongle-Era Gilt Bronze Statue of Guanyin" (Episode 8, Season 4) focuses on Ming religious art and ethnic integration. It recounts the Yongle-era construction of Qutan Monastery's Baoguang Hall, where supervising eunuch Meng Ji faced ethnic tensions. A Tibetan chieftain resented Han-style architecture and his children's departure, while a Han official called for military action. A Tibetan woman's sacrifice and Meng Ji's wisdom resolved the crisis. The Guanyin statue, cast by Yongle's order and bestowed upon the monastery, embodies Han-Tibetan artistic fusion. This paper examines Meng Ji's costume.

2. Meng Ji's Biography and the Historical Context of His Era

2.1 Defining Meng Ji's Biography

In the drama, Meng Ji is portrayed as a male character in his forties, a eunuch serving in the Imperial Household Manufactory (*Yuyong jian*) of the Ming dynasty. Deeply trusted by the Yongle Emperor, he is dispatched to Qinghai to oversee the expansion project of Qutan Monastery.

The main hall of Qutan Monastery, Longguo Hall, was modeled after Fengtian Hall of the Beijing Imperial Palace (completed 1420). Inside stands a spirit tablet inscribed: "May the emperor live ten thousand years." On its back: "On the ninth day of the second lunar month, second year of Xuande (1427), this was established by Meng Ji, Shang Yi, Chen Heng, and Yuan Qi, eunuchs of the Imperial Household Manufactory (*Yuyong jian*)." These eunuchs supervised the construction of Qutan Monastery. Meng Ji appears only in scattered records. In 1428, he oversaw the final phase of the Nanjing Great Bao'en Temple; once, he returned mid-journey to deliver a victory report. After death, he was buried as a second-rank official near Qutan Monastery (Shen, 2012).

As recorded in the *Memorandum of Generational Succession by Imperial Edicts and Mandates (Jiefeng chijiao daibei xiangchuan qin gong di ce)* of the eighth year of the Shunzhi reign (1651), which is still preserved at Qutan Monastery: "During the Yongle reign, following the repeated orders of the imperial envoy Eunuch Meng, Commander Tian Xuan, and others, and by imperial decree, the Baoguang Hall and the Longguo Hall were built, and a stele was erected to record this event. The founding master, together with the assembly of monks, served as abbots, burning incense and practicing meditation. In the interim, the master also sent his direct disciple monks, including Bodan Zangbu and Suonan Jiancan, from a young age to Tibet to study the scriptures. Subsequently, by repeated imperial orders, eunuchs Meng Ji, Shang Yi, and others were dispatched according to ritual protocol to the capital, where they had an audience with the emperor. The emperor granted them seats and had them chant sutras." (Pu, 2011) From this it can be inferred that in the sixteenth year of the Yongle reign (1418), Meng Ji was sent to Qinghai to participate in the expansion project of Qutan Monastery.

2.2 Defining the Historical Period in Which Meng Ji Lived

The legendary origin of the Yongle-era gilt bronze statue of Guanyin dates to the sixteenth year of the Yongle reign (1418). By this time, the Baoguang Hall of Qutan Monastery in Qinghai was largely completed. Qinghai lies at the crossroads of Han and Tibetan regions, and the Ming dynasty established the "Xining Guard" (*Xining wei*) there, stationing troops to control the passage between the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. The construction of Qutan Monastery served as both a religious center and a military outpost. In the sixth year of Yongle (1408), the Ming court dispatched officials to Qutan Monastery and ordered the construction of a new hall behind the existing Qutan Hall. In the sixteenth year of Yongle (1418), the Yongle Emperor bestowed a name upon this new hall—"Baoguang" (Precious Light) – and personally presented a gilded Buddhist statue as a token of imperial favor. Subsequently, the emperor ordered further construction of additional halls and pavilions. "During the Yongle reign, by repeated imperial orders, the imperial envoy Eunuch Meng Ji, Commander Tian Xuan, and others, following the emperor's decree, built the Baoguang Hall and Longguo Hall, and erected a stele to record this event" (Pu, 2011). More Buddhist halls were then built beyond the newly constructed Baoguang Hall.

In volume 64 of the *Veritable Records of Emperor Taizong*, under the entry of Yimao (the 16th day) of the third lunar month in the fifth year of the Yongle reign (1407), it is recorded: "The imperial edict and official seal were bestowed upon Bandan Zangbu (known as Sanluo Lama), a monk of Qutan Monastery in Xining, and he was ennobled as the Great National Preceptor of Abhiṣeka, Pure Enlightenment, and Vast Salvation." The Yongle Emperor ennobled the eminent Tibetan monk Sanluo Lama (Sanggye Tashi) as "Great National Preceptor of Abhiṣeka, Pure Enlightenment, and Vast Salvation," supported the expansion of Qutan Monastery, and thereby consolidated Ming rule over Qinghai through religious ties (*Ming Shilu*, 1962). Sanluo Lama used Qutan Monastery as a base to propagate the Kagyu school; Meng Ji's involvement indicates that the Ming court sought to control religious discourse by supporting specific sects.

As recorded in the *History of Ming*: "Initially, the Tibetan monk Sanla of Xining wrote letters to summon the tribes of Handong to surrender. He also built a Buddhist monastery at Nanchuan in Nianbai (Nianbo) to house his followers. By this time, he came to court to present horses as tribute and requested an imperial edict to protect the monastery and a bestowal of a temple name. The emperor granted his request and bestowed the name 'Qutan Monastery'. The Xining Monastic Office (*Xining Senggangs*) was established, and Sanluo was appointed as Chief Administrator (*Dugang*)" (Zhang et al., 1974, p. 8541). This shows that Sanluo Lama, a Tibetan Buddhist monk from the Xining area, contributed to stabilizing the Ming dynasty's northwestern frontier by persuading the Handong tribes to submit through letters. In response, the Ming emperor approved his requests, personally bestowed the temple name "Qutan Monastery," and established the Xining Monastic Office to manage local Buddhist affairs, thereby strengthening central control over the border region. Qutan Monastery thus became not only an important Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Qinghai but also a

key link between the Ming dynasty and Tibetan regions.

3. Examination and Interpretation of the Style and Color of Meng Ji's Clothing

It should be noted that the "costume image" discussed in this paper does not constitute an archaeological reconstruction of Meng Ji's historical attire—since no contemporary portraits or tomb artifacts are available for verification—but rather a visual re-creation based on historical logic within the dramatic context of *National Treasure*. The following examination adheres to a "dual-layer chain of evidence" principle. At the first level, it strictly defines the style, color, and material of eunuch attire in accordance with Ming dynasty statutes and surviving paintings. At the second level, while remaining within the bounds of historical plausibility, it analyzes the artistic choices made by the production team to serve character development and narrative conflict.

3.1 Examination and Interpretation of the Style of Meng Ji's Garments

Having witnessed the calamities caused by eunuchs in the late Han and Tang dynasties, Zhu Yuanzhang, from the very beginning of the Ming dynasty, established strict regulations confining eunuchs to internal court affairs. They were permitted only menial tasks—sweeping, delivering messages, awaiting orders—and were forbidden from involving themselves in military or political secrets. A rigid dress code was also instituted. As early as the first year of Wu (1367), Zhu Yuanzhang prescribed eunuch attire. At the beginning of the Ming dynasty, the Office of Inner Attendants (*Neishijian*) was established, and its eunuchs wore: "black gauze hats with golden decorative patterns and curved brims; narrow-sleeved round-collar robes with embroidered patterns on the chest and back, fastened with black horn belts; boots with red fan-shaped uppers and black soles. Eunuchs serving in the imperial palaces (*huozhe*) dressed as commoners" (Zhang et al., 1974, p. 1647). In the third year of the Hongwu reign (1370), to distinguish rank, the emperor further refined the dress code. Eunuchs, like outer-court officials, were granted court robes, ceremonial robes, and everyday attire. "Everyday attire: round-collar robes with sunflower patterns on the chest and back, in any color; black gauze hats; rhino-horn belts. Those without official rank wear round-collar robes without chest/back patterns, in any color; black horn belts; black gauze hats with hanging straps at the back. Persons under fifteen simply wear small black gauze top-knotted hats" (Zhang et al., 1974, p. 1646).

After the Yongle Emperor (Zhu Di) ascended the throne, the strict dress regulations of the Hongwu era were broken. Eunuchs received garments exceeding their rank. During the Jingnan Campaign, Zhu Di, an uncle who seized the throne from his nephew the Jianwen Emperor, was supported by eunuchs who leaked military intelligence and rendered considerable service. "When the Prince of Yan's army approached the north bank of the Yangtze River, many palace eunuchs fled into his camp and leaked the true military situation. The Chengzu Emperor (Yongle) considered these eunuchs loyal to himself, and men like Gou'er were further favored for their military merits. Therefore, after ascending the throne, he entrusted them with many official positions" (Zhang et al., 1974, p. 7766). Regarding eunuchs as reliable, the Yongle Emperor broke with ancestral regulations, entrusting substantial authority to his trusted eunuchs and, as a special favor, bestowing upon them *mang* robes and *qilin* robes—symbols of imperial prerogative. "After the Yongle reign, eunuchs attending the emperor were required to wear a *mang* robe (embroidered with the four-clawed dragon). The robe's style resembled a *yisan* (long-sleeved gown), with the *mang* embroidered on the left and right sides, fastened with a *luan* belt. This was their leisure attire at court. The next rank was the *feiyu* robe (with flying-fish patterns), used only when entering the emperor's presence. Eunuchs who were noble and wielded power were bestowed the *mang* robe—a distinction rarely granted even to first-rank civil and military officials" (Zhang et al., 1974, p. 1647). For eunuchs to wear *mang* robes was originally a ritual transgression, but the Yongle Emperor tacitly permitted this to strengthen his rule, forming a political logic of "granting authority through the bestowal of garments." By elevating eunuch status, he made them agents of imperial power entrusted with state affairs.

According to the character setting, Meng Ji's costume consists of two daily outfits: one for middle age and one for old age. The *tieli* is a robe worn by eunuchs, made of gauze (*sha*), leno (*luo*), or silk damask (*zhu*). It features a large overlapping front flap, narrow sleeves, a length below the knees, and a horizontal band (*lan*) at the lower hem (Wang, 2012, p. 10). The front and back panels are each cut into upper and lower sections. Above the waist, it retains traditional Hanfu features: a straight collar, large overlapping front flap, and right-side closure. Below the waist, dense pleats create a skirt-like effect. The robe has no side slits or lower hem decoration. The pleats include large pleats overlaid with fine small pleats. Based on pleat type, *tieli* can be categorized as large pleat, smooth (*shun*) pleat, spiral (*xuan*) pleat, and so on. By custom, *tieli* are adorned with rank badges (*buzi*), cloud collars (*yunjian*), continuous sleeve patterns (*tongxiu*), and knee bands (*xilan*), with decorative motifs including flying fish (*feiyu*), qilin, and flowers.

In a scented-color hemp flying-fish robe (*xiangse ma feiyu tieli*) formerly in the Kong Mansion collection (Figure 1), the upper and lower body are cut separately. It has a crossed collar trimmed with a white guard band, pleats below the waist, a left-rear side slit, right-side closure, *pipa* sleeves with cuffed openings, no side slits, two pairs of ties on the outer front flap and one pair on the inner front flap, and a pair of belt loops on the back. In *The Pleasures of Zhu Zhanji* (Figure 2), a eunuch playing *chuiwan* (a form of polo) wears an unadorned blue *tieli* with no lower-body slit, no decorative corners on the side hems, and smooth pleats. In *The Lantern Festival Pleasures of the Chenghua Emperor*

(Figure 3), a eunuch wears a red *tieli* with woven gold decoration on the upper part and smooth pleats (without gold on the pleats). These examples serve as references for Meng Ji's middle-aged costume.



Figure 1. Ming dynasty, Scented-color hemp flying-fish *tieli* (Source: Confucius Mansion Collection of Ancient Costumes album, Shandong Museum).



Figure 2. Ming dynasty, Detail 1 of *The Pleasures of Zhu Zhanji* (left).

Figure 3. Ming dynasty, Detail 1 of *The Lantern Festival Pleasures of the Chenghua Emperor* (right).

The *yisan* is a long robe constructed as follows: the back panel is a single continuous piece, with side panels (*bai*) on both sides (Liu, 1994); the front panel is divided into two sections. At the lower hem are horse-face pleats—flat in the center and gathered at the sides—which cause the hem to flare slightly outward. Below the waist, the front panel has a smooth central section with pleats on both sides, resembling a horse-face skirt (*ma mian qun*). Double side panels on the left and right facilitate movement. The robe may be adorned with rank badges (*buzi*), cloud collars (*yunjian*), continuous sleeve patterns (*tongxiu*), or knee bands (*xi*). In *The Pleasures of Zhu Zhanji* (Figure 4), most other eunuchs wear undecorated *yisan* with horse-face pleats below the waist. In *The Lantern Festival Pleasures of the Chenghua Emperor* (Figure 5), fewer eunuchs wear *tieli*; the majority wear *yisan*, either plain or decorated. For example, one eunuch in the painting wears a red *yisan* with decorative corners (*zengjiao*) on both sides of the hem, horse-face pleats below the waist, and woven gold patterns of cloud collars, continuous sleeves, and knee bands. These examples serve as references for Meng Ji's old-age costume.



Figure 4. Ming dynasty, Detail 2 of *The Pleasures of Zhu Zhanji* (left).



Figure 5. Ming dynasty, Detail 2 of *The Lantern Festival Pleasures of the Chenghua Emperor* (right).

3.2 Examination and Interpretation of the Color of Meng Ji's Clothing

According to the *Miscellaneous Notes of the Zhuozhong Studio* (*Zhuozhong zhi*), chief eunuchs of the Directorate of Ceremonial (*Sili jian*)—including Seal Holders (*Zhangyin*), Pen Bearers (*Bingbi*), Attendants (*Suitang*), superintendents of the Qianqing Palace (*Qianqing gong guanzi*), and other close attendants—were permitted to wear red *tieli* robes with appropriate rank badges when serving in the imperial presence. In contrast, eunuchs of the Twenty-Four Bureaus (*Ershisi yamen*), imperial mausoleums (*Shanling*), and lower-ranking eunuchs such as Longsui and *Neishi* wore blue (*qing*) *tieli* (Liu, 1994). Thus, the red *tieli* was reserved for powerful core members of the Directorate of Ceremonial and Qianqing Palace close attendants, with red symbolizing dignity and authority. The blue *tieli* was issued to lower-ranking eunuchs, with blue (a secondary color) signifying subordinate status.

Ming statutes regulated ceremonial robe (*gongfu*) colors by rank: grades 1–4 wore crimson; grades 5–7 wore blue (*qing*); grades 8–9 wore green. Unranked officials wore sandalwood-colored robes. The *Da Ming Ling* (Great Ming Code) states: "For all officials and commoners, attire and colors shall follow distinct ranks. Those of higher rank may wear the clothing of lower ranks, but those of lower rank shall not usurp the clothing of higher ranks" (Zhang, 1967). This means a fourth-grade official may wear a blue everyday robe—a reference for Meng Ji's middle-aged costume.

The colors of eunuch attire also "took beauty as the highest value." According to ancestral regulations, eunuchs wore blue-purple (*qing-zi*) in summer—that is, *tunjuan* (a type of silk fabric)—and plain blue (*qing-su*) in winter—that is, black-colored (*yuan-se*) *zhusi* silk damask (Gao, 2016). The term "beautiful/bright" did not refer to high-saturation colors in the modern sense, but rather to relatively vibrant hues that the eunuch group was permitted to use under the hierarchical system. In the Ming dynasty, eunuchs of the highest rank could wear bright red and *mang* dragon patterns (e.g., the Pen Bearers of the Directorate of Ceremonial), while ordinary eunuchs mostly wore blue, purple, and similar colors. "Blue-purple" (*qing-zi*) was actually a noble hue within the dark-tone spectrum, and because indigo and gromwell dyes were expensive, in ancient times when textile dyeing technology was underdeveloped, such colors themselves carried symbolic meaning of status. Visually, blue-purple has a cool and refreshing quality while being less absorbent of light, making it suitable for hot seasons. Plain blue (*qing-su*), also known as "original black" (*yuan-se*), is close to black and belongs to the dark-color family; it absorbs more light and hides dirt well, meeting the practical needs of winter. *Yuan-se zhusi* silk damask is often described as "dark black" (*xuan-se*) in Ming-dynasty literature, echoing the philosophical concept of the five elements in which winter corresponds to water (whose color is black). To distinguish the clothing of the elderly Meng Ji from that of the middle-aged Meng Ji, the attire of the elderly Meng Ji may refer to *xuan-se*, that is, black.

4. Examination and Interpretation of the Fabric and Pattern of Meng Ji's Clothing

4.1 Examination and Interpretation of the Fabric of Meng Ji's Clothing

The development of the silk industry during the early Ming dynasty (1368–1435) was rooted in the restorative policies of Zhu Yuanzhang's regime regarding agriculture and handicrafts. In order to stabilize the post-war economy,

the Hongwu Emperor implemented the "Hongwu Reign's Golden Age" (*Hongwu zhi zhi*), making agriculture the foundation of the state while promoting the cultivation of cash crops such as mulberry, hemp, and cotton through mandatory measures. In addition, the early Ming adopted the artisan household system (*jianghu zhidu*), under which artisans were registered in household rolls and required to serve in rotation at official workshops. Later, this system was relaxed through the reform of "substitution of corvée labor with silver payments" (*yi yin dai yi*), which loosened personal control and encouraged the rise of private workshops. The government also established central dyeing and weaving bureaus and regional weaving and dyeing offices (e.g., in Suzhou and Hangzhou) to exclusively supply the imperial court, forming a production system in which official and private enterprises operated in parallel.

The *Chinese Dictionary of Costumes and Adornments* defines *tieli* as: "robes worn by Ming eunuchs, made of gauze (*sha* or *luo*) or silk damask (*zhusi*), with a large overlapping front flap, narrow sleeves, length below the knees, and a horizontal band (*lan*) at the lower hem" (Zhou & Gao, 1996). *Zhusi* often appears with *sha*, *luo*, *ling*, *chou*, and *juan* in historical texts. According to Ming archives, *zhusi* was allocated to regional weaving bureaus and used for imperial rewards and clothing, indicating its high status. Volume 489 of the *Veritable Records of the Ming* records a 1611 memorial: "The Imperial Inner Transport Treasury apportioned to Zhejiang and the Southern Direct-administered Area over 43,390 bolts of various silk fabrics—*zhusi*, *sha*, *luo*, *ling*, *chou*, *juan*, and *bo*—together with *Lu-chou* from Shanxi" (Wang, 2008). *Zhusi* is a coarse, raw silk fabric with high warp-weft density, suitable for winter warmth. Hongwu regulations allowed ranked officials to wear everyday robes of variegated colors made of *zhusi*, *ling*, *luo*, or embroidered silk, while commoners could only use *chou*, *juan*, or *sha* (Shen, 1989). Meng Ji, a eunuch of the Imperial Household Manufactory (*Yuyong jian*) and a fourth-rank official trusted by the Yongle Emperor, could therefore wear luxurious fabrics.

As seasons changed, eunuchs adjusted not only garment styles but also fabric types. Compared to outer-court dress regulations, eunuch attire showed greater flexibility and complexity in material selection and seasonal adaptation, reflecting their special status within the overall dress code. According to *Zhuozhong zhi*: "Under the old system, from the fourth day of the tenth lunar month to the third day of the third lunar month, *zhusi* (silk damask) is worn; from the fourth day of the third lunar month to the third day of the fourth lunar month, *luo* (leno) is worn; from the fourth day of the fourth lunar month to the third day of the ninth lunar month, *sha* (gauze) is worn; and from the fourth day of the ninth lunar month to the third day of the tenth lunar month, *luo* is worn. These changes require advance memorial and approval from the Directorate of Ceremonial (*Sili jian*). For weddings and other festive occasions, even in summer or autumn, *zhusi* must still be worn. Cashmere garments are worn from after Light Snow (*Xiaoxue*) until before Beginning of Spring (*Lichun*), together with *zhusi*. On major imperial death anniversaries (*jichen*), plain blue garments (*qing-su fu*) are worn (plain, without patterns or rank badges); for those worshipping at the ancestral temple (*tiaomiao*), blue-green patterned garments are worn; during self-reflection and fasting (*xiusheng*), plain blue garments are also worn. Plain blue garments are made of *tunjuan* in summer and *xuan-se* (dark black) *zhusi* in winter" (Xiefang Zhuren, 2016, P114).

Most large-scale construction projects in the Ming dynasty avoided harsh winter: materials were prepared in spring, and construction concentrated in summer and autumn. The plot does not specify the exact completion time but only states that the Baoguang Hall of Qutan Monastery in Qinghai was largely completed. Given Qinghai's climate, it can be inferred that the hall was likely finished in autumn. Therefore, Meng Ji's costume could use *zhusi*, a fabric suitable for autumn and winter.

4.2 Examination and Interpretation of the Pattern of Meng Ji's Clothing

4.2.1 *Qilin* Pattern

The *qilin* embodies the benevolent nature of "not treading on living insects, nor breaking growing grass," aligning with Confucian virtue and benevolence, thus representing righteousness and peace. Originally deified as a creature with a dragon's head, deer's body, and horse's hooves, soaring through clouds with a jade book in its mouth, its image remained rigid until the Yongle reign, when it was transformed into a more flowing, elegant, and vital form, more closely following the concept of "benevolence" (*ren*). As described: "Its colorful patterns gleam brilliantly, like dark clouds and purple mists; its hooves do not trample upon anything, and wherever it roams, it always chooses the proper ground" (Zhao, 2020).

In the Ming aristocratic dress system, the *qilin* motif was widely used as an auspicious symbol. According to Ming rank regulations, *qilin* patterns appeared in two forms: first, woven or embroidered continuously on cloud collars (*yunjian*), sleeves (*tongxiu*), and knee bands (*xilan*); second, as rank badges (*buzi*) separately embroidered and attached to the chest or back. Ming regulations stipulated that dukes, marquises, imperial consorts' husbands, and counts should wear *qilin* and *baize* on their court robes; officials of the fourth and fifth ranks could also wear *qilin* robes. The Treatise on Carriages and Robes of the *History of Ming* records: "Among the garments bestowed by successive dynasties, civil officials not yet first rank but granted jade belts began with Scholar Luo Furen in the Hongwu era. Duke Yansheng, holding the rank of positive second grade, wears a robe with woven gold *qilin*. This robe was the regular attire for dukes, marquises, imperial consorts' husbands, and counts." "In the 24th year of Hongwu (1391), it was decreed that the

regular robes of dukes, marquises, imperial consorts' husbands, and counts be embroidered with *qilin* and *baize*." Thus, wearing a *qilin* robe was not an ordinary privilege (Gu, 2005). Through the act of bestowing garments, Ming emperors formed a visual discipline—"clothing embodies the Way" (*fu yi zai dao*)—reinforcing imperial majesty while granting political privilege and maintaining constant surveillance. This power technique, both co-opting and deterring, reflected the dialectical wisdom of Ming rule.

Currently, no direct historical evidence confirms that Meng Ji himself was ever granted a *qilin* robe. However, during the Yongle reign, it had become common practice to break with ancestral regulations by bestowing *mang* robes and *qilin* robes upon trusted eunuchs as a means of co-optation. As a eunuch of the Imperial Household Manufactory (*Yuyong jian*) overseeing military and engineering projects on the frontier, Meng Ji's actual authority far exceeded that of his peers. Therefore, this paper adopts a "comparative reference" approach in its costume design logic: even if Meng Ji may not have actually received such a robe, the dramatic depiction endows him with the *qilin* pattern to visually anchor his special identity as an imperial emissary "acting on the emperor's behalf." This constitutes a reasonable inference grounded in historical context rather than a definitive conclusion based on documentary evidence. In essence, the use of this symbolic motif highlights the dual nature of the character's role—caught between that of a "palace servant" and a "frontier grand commissioner."

4.2.2 Auspicious Cloud Pattern (*Ruyi* Cloud Pattern)

Ming-dynasty patterns embodied the principle that "every pattern must have a meaning, and every meaning must be auspicious" (*tu bi you yi, yi bi jixiang*). Among natural motifs, cloud patterns were the most representative, including eight-treasure flowing clouds, ganoderma-linked clouds, and *ruyi* (as-you-wish) clouds (Guan & Jia, 2021). The *ruyi* cloud pattern combines the cloud motif with the *ruyi* motif. The Sanskrit term for *ruyi* is "*analaiddha*." Some sources suggest that *ruyi* was introduced from India, where it was held by Buddhist monks lecturing on sutras to write down texts for reference. The early handle of the *ruyi* was shaped like a finger and used for scratching itches, thus it could follow one's wishes—hence the name (Du & Miao, 2000). The *ruyi* cloud pattern exemplifies the artistic transformation of natural objects, refining the formal features of natural clouds and the *ruyi* object, integrating them with subjective aesthetics, and ultimately forming a decorative motif with both natural rhythm and humanistic significance. The Ming-dynasty four-directional *ruyi* cloud pattern (*sihe ruyi yunwen*) takes the single *ruyi* shape as its basic element. By adding *ruyi* heads, it forms a centripetal symmetrical cloud-head structure—four *ruyi* elements extending upward, downward, left, and right, converging into a complete cloud head. The cloud tails spreading from the edges extend symmetrically in all four directions, presenting a harmonious aesthetic from a bird's-eye perspective.

The *ruyi* cloud pattern evolved gradually over time. In the Yuan dynasty, the *duoyun* (multi-cloud) pattern had a loose structure consisting of three cloud heads without a cloud tail. The Ming dynasty inherited and developed the late Yuan style. In the early Ming, during the Hongwu and Yongle reigns, the three-cloud-head structure gradually evolved into a cloud head formed by four scrolls converging from four directions, with the upper and lower cloud tails connected, a small flying cloud on one side, and relatively thick cloud tails (Qiao, 2021). The *ruyi* cloud pattern unearthed from the tomb of Lady Qian at the Jiubei Tomb complex in Dafu Township, Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, dating to the Yongle reign (Figure 6), features a four-directional (*sihe*) configuration and stylized arrangement, reflecting Ming-dynasty aesthetics and symbolizing the unity of the four directions and good fortune as one wishes.



Figure 6. Ming dynasty, *Ruyi* cloud pattern, collection of the China National Silk Museum.

5. Examination and Interpretation of the Headwear and Footwear of Meng Ji's Clothing

5.1 Examination and Interpretation of Meng Ji's Headwear

In the early Ming, the headwear for eunuchs established by the Hongwu Emperor differed from the black gauze hats of civil and military officials and also lacked court crowns, *futou* (head coverings), and ceremonial attire. Liu Ruoyu, a eunuch of the Wanli period, recalled in his *Zhuozhong zhi*: "When the imperial ancestors established the inner court officials (eunuchs), their headwear, caps, garments, and accessories naturally followed a definite system, and the various designations were largely unknown to officials of the outer court. The old regulations were refined and elegant, often embodying the principles of hierarchical dignity and frugality" (Liu, 1994). The Ming dress system for eunuchs, while inheriting from previous dynasties, formed an independent system distinct from the attire of outer-court officials. Headwear, belts, accessories, and other items of eunuch attire were all strictly regulated.

Eunuch caps were typically the *gangcha mao* (also known as *neishi mao*), a round-capped hat with a bamboo-silk frame covered in dark blue *zhou* gauze (a type of crepe) and decorated with a mountain-shaped ornament at the back. The *Illustrated Record of Ming Dynasty Clothing and Headwear* notes that the "official hat" worn by early Ming inner officials had a round top, a mountain-shaped back, and a double-arched upper portion (Xiefang Zhuren, 2016, P108). The early Ming eunuch official hat was double-arched; by the middle period, it evolved into the three-peaked (*sanshan*) crown. In *The Pleasures of Zhu Zhanji* (Figure 7) and *The Lantern Festival Pleasures of the Chenghua Emperor* (Figure 8), eunuch headwear consistently appears as double-arched *neishi* caps with round tops and mountain-shaped backs. Thus, these serve as references for Meng Ji's headwear.



Figure 7. Detail 3 of *The Pleasures of Zhu Zhanji* (left).



Figure 8. Ming dynasty, Detail 3 of *The Lantern Festival Pleasures of the Chenghua Emperor* (right).

5.2 Examination and Interpretation of Meng Ji's Footwear

Eunuch boots were made of black leather (*zao pi*), similar in shape to those of outer-court officials, but with soft, thin-lined soles and a cloth interior. They followed the same style as the emperor's footwear, except that the front seam lacked diamond corners and the other seams lacked gold thread. The boots were frequently polished and replaced when worn out. Only higher-ranking inner attendants (*neishi*) were entitled to wear them; junior eunuchs (*xiaohuozhe*) wore plain blue cloth shoes and socks (Wang, 2012, p. 13).

The Record of the Western Ocean (*Xiyang ji*), written during the Wanli period, survives in an edition titled *Newly Carved Fully Illustrated Popular Romance of the Three-Treasure Eunuch's Voyage to the Western Ocean* (Luo, 1598). Chapter 46 describes Zheng He's attire: "On his head he wears a three-peaked cap inlaid with gold; on his body a brand new *mang*-dragon robe; at his waist a fine white jade belt; on his feet a pair of black court boots for both civil and military use" (Luo, 1958.). The *Zhuozhong zhi* records: "All inner court officials (eunuchs) are permitted to wear *weng* boots, with red fan-shaped uppers and black lower edges, and to wear a turquoise-green silk cord belt ring ... entirely different from the attire of outer court officials" (Liu, 1994). Although not identical to the official boot system, the special design in shape and color granted eunuchs the qualification to wear boots.

6. Overall Presentation of Meng Ji's Costume Image Design

In the script, Meng Ji is a court eunuch of the Yongle period, responsible for frontier affairs or project supervision. As a key figure in the construction of Qutan Monastery, his role reflects the special function of Ming eunuchs in frontier engineering and religious affairs. His costume design (Figure 9) must conform to court eunuch regulations while adapting to the geography and climate of Qinghai.

In his middle years, Meng Ji—as a favored eunuch—was dispatched to Qinghai to oversee the expansion of Qutan Monastery. At the time of Baoguang Hall's initial completion, he was confronted with Han-Tibetan tensions. His costume thus needed to project both authority and practicality, balancing court ceremonial propriety with the functional demands of engineering supervision, while conveying his dignity, competence, and special status as an imperial envoy. The color *qing* (blue-green) in Han Chinese chromatics carries connotations of cool detachment and distance—aptly

mirroring his role at that stage, as he relied on strict imperial decrees to push forward the project. His outer garment was a blue (*qing*) *zhusi* silk damask *tieli*, a long robe cut in upper and lower sections, with horizontal pleats at the waist and a flared, slit-less hem. Adorned on the cloud collar (*yunjian*), continuous sleeves (*tongxiu*), and knee bands (*xilan*) were *qilin* motifs, depicted with the beast turning its head back, its scales and claws distinctly rendered, and its fangs slightly bared—an image of imposing majesty. Yet the *qilin* itself is a benevolent creature that “does not tread on living insects,” and this subtle allusion foreshadows his later, reluctant choice to avoid bloodshed. On his head he wore a double-arched *neishi* cap covered with black gauze (*wusha*), a belt at his waist, and black leather (*zao*) boots with glossy uppers on his feet.

In his old age, after having experienced Zomba’s sacrifice and the legend of the Guanyin statue, Meng Ji’s attire emphasizes a sense of primitive simplicity and dignity. More importantly, through the language of costume, it conveys his inner transformation from suppression to tolerance following these conflicts. His outer garment is a *yisan*, made of *xuan-colored* (dark black) *zhusi* silk damask—fine and crisp in texture—with subtly woven *ruyi* cloud patterns, symbolizing enduring good fortune. In the five-phase (*wuxing*) cosmology, *xuan* (black) corresponds to water, which is supremely yielding yet overcomes hardness, signifying his shift from rigidity to flexibility. The robe is meticulously tailored: the front is cut in upper and lower sections; above the waist, it features a straight collar, large overlapping front flap, and right-side closure; below the waist, it takes the form of a *ma mian qun* (horse-face skirt), with a wide central panel flanked by dense, fine “I”-shaped pleats, accompanied by double side panels that sway gently in the breeze; the back panel is cut as a single continuous piece, and as he walks, the hem moves with an air of composure befitting an elder. The *sihe ruyi* (four-directional *ruyi*) cloud patterns adorning the robe are themselves a visual metaphor of multi-element integration, precisely echoing the stylistic synthesis between “Han-style architecture” and “Tibetan Buddhism” ultimately achieved in the casting of the Buddhist statue within the drama. His headwear remains the double-arched *neishi* cap covered with black gauze (*wusha*), a belt at his waist, and black leather (*zao*) boots with uppers as dark as ink on his feet.



Figure 9. Overall physical design of Meng Ji’s image (still from *National Treasure* Season 4).

7. Summary

This paper takes the “legendary past life of the Yongle-era gilt bronze statue of Guanyin” from Season 4 of *National Treasure* as its starting point, examining the costume of Meng Ji, a eunuch of the Imperial Household Manufactory (*Yuyong jian*) during the Yongle reign. Through historical analysis and cross-referencing with visual evidence, the study explores Meng Ji’s dual identity as a frontier project supervisor and a cultural envoy. His costume design adhered to the Ming eunuch dress code while integrating Han-Tibetan cultural exchange. His middle-aged attire—a blue (*qing*) *zhusi* silk damask *tieli* adorned with *qilin* patterns—signified imperial authority; his elderly *yisan* robe of *xuan-se* (dark black) *zhusi* with *ruyi* cloud patterns represented accumulated merit and longevity. The paper reveals costume as a carrier of historical codes, offering a methodological reference for reconstructing historical figures in modern film and television. The research not only restores the formal features of Ming eunuch attire but also uncovers costume’s dual nature as both political symbol and cultural vehicle. Just as the Guanyin statue has traversed six hundred years, the true essence of traditional civilization may reside in the eternal dialogue of such “living heritage.”

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

Author's Contribution

Methodology: Y.Y.; Investigation: Y.Y.; Writing—Original Draft Preparation: Y.Y.; Writing—Review & Editing: P.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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