The history of clothing regulation in China is similar to that of Japan. Both countries developed complex social ranking systems in which colors, fabrics, and symbols designated the social rank to which a person belonged. Unlike the Japanese, however, the Chinese system was not completely based on heredity, but more on an individual’s talent and virtue. A person who rose through the Chinese rank system could wear the clothing designated for their new rank whereas in Japan, a person might improve their rank but could only wear the clothing of the rank they were born into. There were nine ranks (nine being the highest) in the Chinese court system ranging from the emperor, nobles, military officials, and scholars to civil servants. And, like the Japanese, further delineations within each rank were identified through shades of color.

China: Dressed to the Nines

Women

While women were excluded from civil and military positions, they still found ways to demonstrate their social status through clothing. One social custom dating back to the Zhou Dynasty (1122 B.C.-256 B.C.), was for married women (and girls past the age of 15 who were engaged to be married), to wear pins in their hair. These pins were made from either bone or stone and might have carving etchings in the material. Only in certain cases were old unmarried women allowed to wear hair pins.

Shoes were another way for a woman to display her social status. Small feet were not only considered beautiful, but it was a status symbol because it meant the woman’s family was wealthy enough so that she didn’t have to work. The ideal was to have a foot smaller than three inches, which was called “The Golden Lotus.” The practice of foot binding lasted about 1000 years before it was banned the early 20th century by the Chinese government.

Men

Every person who worked for the emperor wore a badge in the center of his chest. A bird indicated the person was a civil official and an animal indicated he was in the military. Soldiers and laborers wore shoes made of green, blue or white fabric. During formal ceremonies and rituals they wore boots or shoes with raised tips related to their rank. Hats were the primary indicator of social status for men. The shape, color and type of ornament on the top of the hat identified their rank. Hats were so important that in 59 A.D. Emperor Xiaomeng documented the regulations in writing for the first time, which shifted a social custom to a legal process.

The bird in the center of this man’s robe indicates he was a civil servant in the emperor’s court. Source: Zhengguo 5000 Years of Chinese Costume, 1987.

Military members wore animal designs on their chest patches. A tiger represented a member of the fourth rank. Source: Zhengguo 5000 Years of Chinese Costume, 1987.

Commoners

Commoners without rank in the emperor’s court had limited fashion choices. For everyday clothing they were allowed to wear blue and black colored fabric and during formal ceremonies could wear coarse fabrics in colors such as purple, green and pink but were forbidden to wear gold embroidery. When performing outdoor work they wore sandals and clogs made of hemp or wood and during the hot summer months they went barefoot.

Hair pins were a symbol of social status for women and formally limited to those who were married. Pins were made of materials such as jade or bone. Source: Zhengguo 5000 Years of Chinese Costume, 1987.

This picture must have been made during the summer months because commoners went barefoot in the summer and wore wooden sandals in the winter. Source: Alexander, The Costume of China, 1885.