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Negotiating Autonomy: A Narrative Analysis of Women's Agency and Capital during the Tang Dynasty in Chinese History

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the agency of women in the Tang Dynasty through Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework of *agency* and *capital*, using three female figurines from the Shaanxi History Museum as primary objects of analysis. Depicting women in elaborate makeup, on horseback, and in men's clothing, these figurines are examined through narrative analysis as storied cultural artifacts that encode gendered identities, performances, and power relations within a patriarchal social structure. Rather than treating the objects as static representations, the study interprets them as embodied narratives that reveal how women's actions were both enabled and constrained by historical conditions. The findings demonstrate that women's agency in the Tang Dynasty was not a simple act of resistance against patriarchy but a negotiated and contingent process shaped by the strategic mobilization of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. These women mobilized available capital to assert autonomy within rigid gender norms. The study also acknowledges its limitation in focusing primarily on elite women, as lower-status women are underrepresented in surviving material culture. Narrative inquiry exposes the paradox of historical agency: acts of resistance often depend on structural privilege and remain entangled within the very systems they aim to challenge. This approach underscores the value of narrative methods in uncovering nuanced and context-dependent expressions of female empowerment in the past.

Keywords: Agency; Bourdieu; Capital; China; Tang Dynasty; Women

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1. Introduction

The ancient Chinese gender system, deeply rooted in the cosmology of yin-yang harmony and centered around the family unit, developed into a hierarchical structure that positioned men as superior and women as subordinate during the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties (c. 2070–256 BCE) ^[1]. This framework became increasingly codified alongside the rise of the feudal autocracy, embedding itself into the symbolic and moral fabric of Chinese society. Philosophically, the extension of yin-yang dualism to the social realm was encapsulated in the maxim ‘Qian (Heaven) ruling Kun (Earth), and men ruling women’ ^[2], while Confucian doctrines such as Dong Zhongshu’s ‘Three Bonds’ (san gang) further institutionalized patriarchal authority through the tenet ‘husband as the guide for the wife’ ^[3].

Institutionally, this ideology was reinforced through the royal family’s polygynous marriage practices and patrilineal inheritance, excluding women from ancestral rites and economic independence ^[4]. Socially, roles were rigidly defined by principles such as ‘men handle external affairs, women manage the household’ (nan zhu wai nv zhu nei), and moral codes like the ‘Three Obediences and Four Virtues’ (san cong si de) ^[5]. The enforcement of a restrictive chastity discourse (pian mian de zhen cao guan) further constrained women’s autonomy ^[6], entrenching patriarchal norms across cultural, religious, and legal domains.

The Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), often regarded as a golden age of Chinese civilization, witnessed considerable sociocultural dynamism and political strength ^[7]. Known for its economic prosperity and relative openness, this period provided women with unprecedented, though still limited, social visibility. Women’s roles in education, politics, literature, and the arts became more prominent, as evidenced by figures such as Empress Wu Zetian, Princess Taiping, and the poet Yu Xuanji ^[8,9]. The relatively relaxed attitudes toward marriage, divorce, and remarriage, along with the adoption of diverse clothing styles like Hu clothing and Tang attire, reflected evolving social values ^[10,11]. Women’s engagement in statecraft and intellectual production not only signaled their contribution to Tang society but also illuminated the tension between conformity and transgression within patriarchal structures ^[12].

This study reexamines representations of women in

the Tang Dynasty through a narrative inquiry framework, treating visual artifacts not simply as material evidence but as curated narrative texts that actively construct and circulate meanings about gender, agency, and social roles ^[13,14]. By incorporating narrative theory into gender analysis, this approach highlights how institutional framing, symbolic motifs, and historical imagination converge in museum contexts to tell particular stories of women’s lives. These stories are not neutral reflections of history but structured discourses shaped by cultural ideologies, representational gazes, and interpretive authority ^[15,16].

The analysis focuses on three female figurines displayed at the Shaanxi History Museum, a leading institution with over 1.7 million artifacts. These figurines, depicting women in makeup, on horseback, and in men’s clothing, are read as narrative representations of different forms of capital: cultural, social, and symbolic ^[17]. Using Bourdieu’s theory of capital and agency, the study examines how women in the Tang Dynasty might have negotiated power, visibility, and constraint through performative strategies encoded in material and cultural narratives. The study addresses two central research questions: (1) How do these female figurines narrate women’s agency in relation to capital? (2) What strategies of negotiation and self-positioning are embedded in these representations within the constraints of Tang society?

2. Literature Review

Agency in the social sciences is broadly defined as the capacity to define one’s goals and act upon them ^[18]. It highlights the role of individuals as active agents capable of making choices and shaping both their own lives and the social structures around them ^[19]. However, agency is not exercised in a vacuum; it is influenced by institutional, cultural, and normative constraints. Promoting agency thus requires not only resources but also the conditions for meaningful choice and self-determination ^[20].

In feminist theory, agency is central to understanding women’s empowerment and gender dynamics. Feminist scholars, from early theorists to contemporary thinkers, have highlighted the importance of agency in challenging traditional gender roles and structures of power. De Beauvoir rejects the view of women as passive objects

and asserts their potential for self-determination ^[21]. This idea laid the groundwork for a broader understanding of women's autonomy. Following de Beauvoir, feminist theorists evolved to examine the intersectionality of agency with other dimensions such as race, class, and sexuality. Butler, for instance, framed agency not only as resistance to oppression but also as the negotiation of social norms, identities, and power relations ^[22]. In a similar vein, Spivak critically examined the limitations of agency within colonial structures, arguing that women's autonomy is often constrained by larger socio-political forces, such as colonialism ^[23].

The past two decades have seen continued contributions to the exploration of women's agency in a range of contexts. Einspahr discusses the shift in feminist theorizing from seeing patriarchy as a monolithic structure of male domination to understanding it as a more complex interaction of women's subjectivity, identity, and agency ^[24]. Hanmer and Klugman analyze the challenges in measuring women's agency and empowerment in developing countries, recognizing the limitations of data and the need for a more nuanced understanding of women's lived experiences ^[25]. Studies such as those by Ozkazanc-Pan and Taha show how women assert agency within highly constrained environments, from social media activism to displacement and conflict ^[26,27].

Despite this progress, gaps remain in exploring how women's agency is historically narrated, especially in non-Western, premodern contexts. Much of the literature focuses on contemporary struggles or Western paradigms of empowerment, leaving underexamined how women in ancient societies negotiated power and identity. In the context of China, feminist histories have yet to fully address how women in the Tang Dynasty exercised agency within patriarchal systems. Existing research often neglects how material artifacts and their symbolic representation can serve as narrative sites for reconstructing women's experiences and social roles.

This study addresses these gaps by integrating narrative inquiry into the analysis of material artifacts, mainly focusing on three Tang Dynasty female figurines from the Shaanxi History Museum. These artifacts are not merely artistic depictions but narrative texts that encode historically situated understandings of gender, status, and power.

Narrative analysis, which highlights how meaning is constructed through culturally embedded storytelling practices, offers a methodologically rich way to examine figurines as products of institutional and ideological narratives ^[13,15]. By drawing on Bourdieu's theory of capital, the study investigates how women may have employed cultural, social, and symbolic capital to assert their presence within restrictive gender hierarchies. Through a narrative lens, the figurines are interpreted as visual stories that offer insight into women's agency and the gendered dynamics of Tang society.

3. Theoretical Considerations

This study draws on a relational and praxeological epistemology, aligning with Bourdieu's approach to understanding social structures and agency. Bourdieu's framework posits that social action is neither fully determined nor completely autonomous, but is shaped by the interaction between individuals and the social fields they inhabit ^[28]. The study utilizes two key sociological concepts, *agency* and *capital*, to explore how women in the Tang Dynasty navigated and redefined the patriarchal power structures of their time.

Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and effect change within societal constraints. Drawing on Bourdieu's definition, agency in this study is understood as the ability to act within a social field, even when actions are shaped by its structures and norms ^[29]. Bourdieu emphasizes that agency is not synonymous with autonomy, but rather reflects an individual's ability to engage with and negotiate societal power dynamics through the resources they possess. The women in the Tang Dynasty exercised agency through acts of defiance and strategic engagement with various forms of capital, carving out spaces for autonomy despite living within a rigid patriarchal system.

Bourdieu's concept of capital, comprising economic, social, cultural, and symbolic forms, provides a critical framework for understanding how these women accumulated and deployed power within their social fields. Bourdieu's theory has been adapted by feminist scholars like Skeggs and Reay, who emphasize how women strategically use capital to challenge or navigate patriarchal systems

^[30,31]. In our analysis, these forms of capital allowed Tang women to assert power in a gendered society. Economic capital, for example, granted access to luxurious textiles and elaborate garments, while cultural capital enabled women to reinterpret sartorial codes and engage in intellectual circles. Symbolic capital, such as the strategic use of male attire or involvement in political leadership, facilitated respect and authority, thus expanding their influence.

By combining agency and capital, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how women in the Tang Dynasty exercised power and redefined their gendered roles. The women analyzed were not passive subjects but active agents who mobilized various forms of capital to challenge gendered norms and assert new identities. Their actions illustrate the complex interplay between agency and capital, where the ability to act is shaped by available resources, which are mobilized strategically to reshape social structures. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of gendered power dynamics in both historical and contemporary contexts.

4. Methodology

This study employs a narrative analysis approach to examine how Tang Dynasty female figurines displayed in the Shaanxi History Museum participate in the cultural construction of gendered meaning. Rather than treating these figurines as static historical evidence, the study views them as narrative artifacts, material texts that, through curatorial framing and institutional narration, convey socially and historically contingent stories about femininity, power, and agency. Following Riessman, narrative is understood not simply as content but as a way of organizing and giving meaning to experience through structure, voice, and perspective. The museum exhibition is treated as a discursive space where competing narratives of history, gender, and nation are constructed and naturalized ^[13]. As Hnit and Almann note, identity and meaning are produced within relational narrative networks, not in isolation, which calls for critical attention to how museums position both their subjects and their audiences through these curated stories ^[32].

Fieldwork was conducted on-site at the Shaanxi History Museum between January and February 2025.

The primary data consist of photographs of Tang Dynasty female figurines, observational fieldnotes, exhibit labels, and transcriptions of docent audio recordings. These materials are treated as layered narrative constructions, shaped by multiple narrators (curators, historians, visitors) and institutional agendas. Drawing from Hyden's notion of 'entangled narratives,' the analysis attends to how multiple narrative voices, visual, textual, and spoken, interact and sometimes contradict one another in the museum space ^[16]. This approach recognizes that the figurines themselves do not 'speak' a singular history; rather, they are activated through interpretive frameworks that embed them within dominant cultural discourses. The inclusion of docent narratives and institutional texts further highlights how authority and expertise shape the stories told about women in history, an aspect largely overlooked in positivist treatments of museum artifacts.

Three figurines were selected for narrative analysis: a woman in makeup, a woman on horseback, and a woman in men's clothing. These artifacts are interpreted as embodied storylines, each reflecting different narrative themes related to gendered identity, social mobility, and resistance. The woman in makeup represents narratives of aesthetic discipline and symbolic capital, emphasizing the social scripts tied to feminine beauty. The woman on horseback invokes narratives of boundary-crossing and elite access, complicating the rigid gender binaries often presumed in historical reconstructions. The woman in men's clothing raises questions about gender performativity and symbolic transgression, reflecting how historical women may have navigated or disrupted patriarchal norms. Following Bamberg, who argues that even 'small stories' reveal positioning strategies and identity claims, the analysis focuses not only on what these figurines represent, but on how they invite viewers to position women as either compliant subjects or agents of subversion ^[15]. These representational cues are not neutral; they are narrative decisions shaped by cultural ideologies and institutional choices.

Narrative inquiry requires a methodological commitment to reflexivity and relationality ^[14]. This study, therefore, interrogates not only the content of the museum's representations but the structural conditions under which these narratives are produced and circulated. For instance, official museum texts often present historical interpreta-

tions as objective fact, yet these are themselves the result of selective storytelling. What is emphasized, omitted, or visually foregrounded reflects the representational gaze of the institution, often shaped by modern cultural politics, nationalist narratives, and gender ideologies. Drawing on McConnell and Benveniste’s insight into narrative creativity, the study views these figurines as imaginative reconstructions, embedded in efforts to engage publics and shape civic values, rather than straightforward records of the past^[33]. Thus, rather than making sweeping generalizations about Tang Dynasty women based on a few curated figurines, the study critically explores how narrative frames shape what is knowable and sayable about women in history.

5. Results

5.1. Tri-Colored Pottery Sitting Female Figure

- **Museum Display Narrative:** Excavated from the Eastern Suburbs of Xi’an City in 1955, this glazed figure (**Figure 1**) is sitting on a stool holding a bronze mirror (broken) in her left hand to do her face-painting work, which vividly shows the use of bronze mirrors in people’s daily life in the Tang Dynasty.



Figure 1. Tri-Colored Pottery Sitting Female Figure.

- **Museum Audio Narrative:** This female figurine stands 48.5 cm tall and weighs 2.645 kg. It was excavated in 1955 from Tomb No. 90 at Wangjiafen in Xi’an, dating to the Tang Dynasty. Based on her demeanor and attire, she likely represents a noblewoman of high status. Her posture is natural and composed, exuding tranquility and elegance, with an air of privilege cultivated by a life of comfort. Some researchers even suggest that this figurine may depict the tomb’s owner herself. The figurine wears her hair in a “Woman bun” (a high, coiled hairstyle), with side locks framing her full, rounded face. She is dressed in a tender green long-sleeved blouse and a high-waisted red floor-length skirt. In her right hand, she holds a bronze mirror with a handle, tilting her head slightly as if to gaze at her reflection. Her posture is graceful, and the flowing lines of her garments highlight the elegant, confident charm characteristic of Tang women.

- **Analysis:** The scene of the woman grooming herself in the tri-colored figurine vividly demonstrates the agency of women in the Tang dynasty. This pursuit and display of beauty show the woman’s emphasis on her appearance and her ability to shape it. Through makeup, hairstyle, and clothing, the woman expresses her aesthetic views and social status, demonstrating her agency in personal image crafting. The act of grooming, particularly the use of a bronze mirror, is not just a daily routine but an embodied practice that reflects her position within a broader cultural framework. As Bourdieu suggests, appearance and dress are critical manifestations of embodied cultural capital, signaling one’s social position and reinforcing class boundaries^[34].

In the context of the Tang dynasty, these forms of capital were highly stratified. Women like her, through their cultivation of beauty and social manners, turned their appearance into a culturally recognized form of capital. The metaphor of the mirror is significant here: as the woman gazes into it, she not only shapes her image but actively participates in a system of cultural practices that reflect and reinforce her social standing. This act of self-presentation can be seen as a way of accumulating and displaying cultural capital, which directly contributes to her elevated

position within the social hierarchy^[34].

The intricately detailed attire of the Tang dynasty figurine, a narrow-sleeved blouse, a brocade short jacket, and a pleated long skirt, serves as a vivid reflection of both the aesthetic sensibilities and social agency of the woman. Beyond mere fashion, these garments symbolize the economic prosperity of the era. The complexity of the textiles and designs required significant resources, highlighting the wearer's access to material wealth^[35]. Bourdieu's concept of economic capital provides a useful lens here: economic capital facilitates cultural production and consumption, allowing the woman to engage with and embody these aesthetic trends^[17].

This access to material wealth also enabled women to transform financial means into cultural creativity. As Bourdieu notes, economic capital often facilitates cultural innovation, which in turn contributes to the establishment of cultural capital^[17]. Women in the Tang Dynasty, through their sartorial choices, became cultural agents, transforming clothing into a form of social expression and recognition. The widespread adoption of such social trends underscored the dynasty's endorsement of female beauty and self-expression, suggesting a cultural environment where women could assert their identity and status through clothing^[36].

The woman's attire, then, functions as symbolic capital: it is a visual signifier of her social position, one that transcends the material and aesthetic realm to become a tool for garnering respect and reaffirming her place within the elite strata. As Bourdieu explains, symbolic capital operates through recognition and legitimation within a social field^[17]. In this case, her clothing, as a symbolic marker, helps codify her social standing, enabling her to navigate and manipulate the social hierarchy effectively.

The figurine's poised and elegant demeanor embodies the cultivated grace expected of women in the Tang Dynasty, reflecting both her privileged status and ability to navigate societal expectations^[37]. However, this posture is not merely a passive reflection of rank; it is an active assertion of agency. In line with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the woman's posture and comportment are shaped by her social context but also reflect her active engagement with and mastery of the cultural practices of her class. The graceful posture, with her head tilted as she gazes into the

mirror, is a manifestation of her cultural literacy, the way she has internalized the norms and expectations of her social class and translated them into personal comportment.

By adhering to and mastering the behavioral norms of her class, the woman transforms personal comportment and cultural literacy into a form of social power. Such displays of cultural capital serve as a mechanism for distinguishing oneself from those of lower status. As Bourdieu argues, cultural capital includes not only knowledge and taste but also the capacity to project social authority through subtle, embodied actions^[34]. The woman's demeanor is, therefore, an expression of her social power, crafted through the mastery of cultural practices that are both personal and collective in nature.

Ultimately, the grooming scene completes the transformation of capital forms. This cycle, from economic capital (the material wealth that enabled her sartorial choices), to cultural capital (the cultivation of aesthetic practices and tastes), to social capital (the networks of elite status and recognition), and finally to symbolic capital (the social recognition and legitimacy her appearance commands), allows the woman to transform structural constraints into symbolic authority^[34]. While the woman's agency may appear constrained by Confucian gender norms, particularly the doctrine of 'wives following their husbands,' which held significant sway in the Tang Dynasty^[38], she reconfigures this within the social and cultural structures of her time. Although the patriarchal framework undeniably restricts her actions, she navigates and even subtly reconstructs her identity by leveraging the forms of capital at her disposal. In this way, Bourdieu's concept reveals how women, far from being entirely passive subjects of patriarchal structures, utilized the available forms of capital to assert and enhance their agency. Through the accumulation of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital, the woman's agency is not exercised in opposition to the structures of power but through them, revealing the complexity of agency within systems of inequality.

5.2. Painted Female Figure on Horseback in Hat

- **Museum Display Narrative:** Excavated from the Tomb of Zheng Rentai, Liquan County, Xianyang City. The Tang Dynasty is a period of open-minded-

ness. Women enjoyed so much social freedom that they could often go outside riding horses instead of taking sedans. Similar female figures on horseback give solid evidence and a vivid picture of women's free life at that time.

- **Museum Audio Narrative:** This figurine (**Figure 2**) is mounted on a yellow horse with red spots, holding the reins and looking forward with a leisurely and elegant demeanor. This figurine captures the essence of noble women's outings during the early Tang Dynasty. Her attire is a vivid testament to the Tang Dynasty's fusion of Hu (non-Han) and Han cultures. The conical hat, originally a practical garment for protecting against wind and sand in the Western Regions, became a fashionable accessory for noblewomen when traveling. The Hu-style clothing, with its narrow sleeves and tight fit, facilitated horseback riding and archery, breaking away from the traditional Han Chinese preference for loose, wide robes. This shift highlighted Tang women's pursuit of freedom and convenience.



Figure 2. Painted Female Figure on Horseback in Hat.

- **Analysis:** This figurine not only reflects the Tang Dynasty's fusion of Hu (non-Han) and Han cultures but also offers valuable insight into the agency of

women during that time. The woman's attire is a key example of the economic capital and cultural capital she had access to. The use of fine materials and intricate designs in her clothing indicates her wealth and access to high-quality garments, signaling the economic capital that enabled her to display her elite status. Bourdieu notes that economic capital, whether through direct access to wealth or the means to acquire such resources, serves as the foundation for the accumulation of other forms of capital^[17]. In this case, the woman's wealth allows her to participate in a cultural sphere where fashion is not just about appearance, but also a tool for signaling social position.

Furthermore, the adoption of a conical hat, a non-Han item, reflects the cultural capital the woman accumulated through exposure to diverse cultures. By incorporating Hu elements into her fashion, she demonstrated not only her cosmopolitan tastes but also her cultural sophistication, an important form of embodied cultural capital. Bourdieu defines cultural capital as the knowledge, tastes, and skills that individuals acquire through education and socialization, and the woman's attire embodies this capital in a particularly visible way^[34]. The ability to blend Hu-style garments with Han influences reveals her personal education and cultural exposure, signaling a high level of social competence and the capacity to engage with, and influence, elite cultural practices. The cultural capital reflected in her fashion choices goes beyond the material; this blending of cultural styles demonstrates the woman's cultural literacy, which allowed her to assert a position of authority in the cultural sphere^[39]. By adopting elements from multiple cultures, she not only navigated the elite social space but also shaped it.

The figurine's depiction of the woman riding a horse also underscores the social capital at her disposal. Horseback riding for leisure became a popular practice among women in the Tang Dynasty, inspired by prominent figures such as Empress Wu Zetian (mentioned above) and Princess Taiping (mentioned above)^[40]. These women's participation in traditionally male-dominated activities such as polo and hunting symbolized their ability to break out of the traditional constraints placed on women^[41], and the

woman in the figurine is portrayed within this broader cultural shift.

Bourdieu defines social capital as the networks, relationships, and social ties that individuals cultivate over time^[17]. The woman's participation in equestrian activities suggests that she was not simply engaging in a private, personal pastime; rather, she was actively participating in the cultural and social life of the elite class. Her equestrian pursuits allowed her to establish and strengthen relationships with others within her social circle, both male and female. These social networks, as Bourdieu argues, are essential sources of power and influence, enabling individuals to shape and navigate the social order^[34]. Through her access to these networks, the woman could enhance her political and social capital, ultimately contributing to her agency within the societal structure^[42].

The figurine's attire and activities also function as symbolic capital, a concept that refers to the recognition, prestige, and honor individuals receive within their social environment^[34]. The adoption of Hu-style clothing and the practice of horseback riding were not simply aesthetic or recreational choices; they were potent symbols of her social status, independence, and agency. The symbolic capital tied to these practices is especially powerful in a hierarchical society like the Tang Dynasty, where symbols of status and power were central to how individuals negotiated their identities^[43].

Incorporating elements of Hu culture into her attire and participating in the traditionally male-dominated practice of horseback riding were ways for the woman to assert her independence and social identity. She was not just conforming to societal norms; she was actively shaping them, using her symbolic capital to signal her elevated position and her ability to navigate and even subvert traditional gender roles^[22]. This strategic use of symbolic capital allowed her to maintain agency within a highly structured social field. Through the act of displaying her wealth, taste, and cultural sophistication, the woman was making a statement about her position in the social order, one that combined both privilege and power.

The woman's engagement with these cultural practices, from her fashion choices to her equestrian pursuits, reflects a sophisticated interplay of capital forms, allowing

her to exercise agency within and through the very systems that sought to restrict it. The figurine provides a compelling example of how women in the Tang Dynasty used their cultural, economic, social, and symbolic capital to assert their agency. Through their fashion choices and participation in equestrian activities, women in the Tang Dynasty navigated and influenced the social and cultural landscape of their time. This figurine is not merely a historical artifact; it is a powerful testament to the agency of women in the Tang Dynasty, showcasing how they leveraged different forms of capital to shape their own identities and assert their independence in a society that both constrained and empowered them.

5.3. Tri-Colored Figurine of a Woman in Men's Attire

- **Museum Display Narrative:** Excavated from a tomb in Zhongbaocun, Xi'an City, in 1959. Women wearing men's clothing was a significant fashion trend in Tang Dynasty society, and some noblewomen often appeared in public dressed in men's attire.
- **Museum Audio Narrative:** The figurine (**Figure 3**) has her hair styled in a double bun with a fairy-gazing coiffure, a plump face, delicate eyebrows, eyes, slightly parted red lips, and a gentle upward tilt of the head, all complemented by a sweet smile. She is dressed in a bright green round-collared robe with a floral pattern, featuring vibrant colors and exquisite designs. She wears a headscarf, a leather belt around her waist, and pointed shoes, with her hands concealed within the wide sleeves. Her posture is elegant and graceful, and her figure is slender and delicate. The Tang Dynasty was the zenith of China's feudal society, characterized by an open social atmosphere and relatively high status for women. Women wearing men's clothing was a significant fashion trend of the time. The robe worn by this figurine was the regular attire for officials and scholars at that time. This unique style of dress not only reflects the Tang women's pursuit of beauty but also embodies the openness and inclusiveness of the society at that time.



Figure 3. Tri-Colored Figurine of a Woman in Men's Attire.

- Analysis:** The Tang Dynasty marked a period of cultural dynamism and shifting gender dynamics, where women navigated a complex interplay of societal constraints and opportunities. The figurine of the woman in men's attire serves as a potent symbol of this resistance, illustrating how women in the Tang Dynasty strategically mobilized various forms of capital to assert their agency and redefine their roles within society. By adopting men's attire, the woman strategically used cultural capital to contest entrenched gendered sartorial codes. In a Confucian patriarchal society, where clothing acted as a rigid marker of identity, male robes symbolizing authority and women's dress emphasizing domesticity^[44], her choice to wear masculine clothing was not just a fashion statement but an act of cultural transgression^[45]. The appropriating of male dress, such as the *hufu* (mentioned above) and ceremonial robes, is an example of how she used cultural capital, embodied through knowledge of fashion and aesthetic codes, to destabilize and subvert established gender norms^[46]. Through her attire, she reinterpreted cultural symbols, such as motifs symbolizing power (dragons, clouds), as tools of self-expression, signaling her active role in shaping cultural narratives^[34].

The cultural capital embedded in the woman's clothing speaks not only to her aesthetic sophistication but also to her ability to leverage this cultural literacy for social positioning. The embodied cultural capital in her dress, the intricate designs, and the fluidity of her garments demonstrate her access to high cultural practices, marking her as a member of the elite. By wearing these clothes, she is not merely copying male dress codes but wielding them as a symbol of status and power within the Tang social field. Her clothing represents an embodied form of cultural knowledge, one that aligns her with the political and intellectual elite of the time. This strategic use of cultural capital allows her to contest established gender norms, claiming space within the spheres typically reserved for men^[34].

By donning men's attire, the woman strategically mobilized social capital to access and redefine male-dominated spheres. In a society where women's public presence was often restricted, this sartorial choice was a means of achieving visibility within elite circles^[47]. As Bourdieu explains, social capital refers to the network of relationships and connections that individuals build, which provide opportunities for influence and power^[17]. In this context, the woman's adoption of male dress enabled her to enter networks of scholars, officials, and foreign envoys, spheres where her voice might have otherwise been marginalized. The act of cross-dressing can be seen as a form of social maneuvering, allowing women like her to participate in intellectual and political conversations. Similar to courtesans like Tao Xue (mentioned above), who hosted literary salons dressed in scholar-official attire, this woman used her social capital to create opportunities for herself in male-dominated spaces, gaining patronage and enhancing her influence^[46].

The adoption of male clothing also served as a form of symbolic capital, which Bourdieu defines as the prestige, honor, and recognition that individuals earn through the successful accumulation and strategic use of various forms of capital^[34]. In the Tang Dynasty, clothing was a potent symbol of authority, and by appropriating masculine attire, the woman not only challenged gender norms but also redefined what authority and power could look like in an imperial society^[46]. The act of cross-dressing was a symbolic assertion of authority, signaling that women,

too, could embody leadership and intellectual capabilities. Much like Empress Wu Zetian (introduced above), whose lavish wardrobe symbolized her authority as a ruler, the woman in the figurine used her attire to challenge the gendered norms of power and authority. This sartorial defiance was symbolically charged—it was not just about fashion but about reclaiming the symbols of power typically reserved for men and transforming them into tools of feminist agency^[34].

The opulence of the woman's clothing also highlights the role of economic capital in facilitating this defiance. As Bourdieu notes, economic capital is foundational in the accumulation of cultural and social capital^[17]. The luxurious silks, imported dyes, and gold-thread embroidery in her garments were not accessible to just anyone; they were reserved for the elite. While clothing has long been a marker of social distinction, these particular garments did more than reflect status; they served to reinforce it^[48]. In this context, economic capital provided the means for the woman to engage in acts of performative resistance^[22]. Only women with significant resources could afford such extravagant, gender-neutral fashion, which blurred gender boundaries and attracted public attention. The woman's ability to access and invest in such material wealth allowed her to engage in acts of self-expression that were beyond the reach of lower-status women. This aligns with Bourdieu's argument that economic capital is a key enabler of social mobility and the reproduction of cultural and symbolic capital^[17].

The defiance of gender norms by this woman was a deliberate and strategic use of intersecting forms of capital: cultural, social, economic, and symbolic. By leveraging cultural capital, she was able to reinterpret gendered clothing codes; by mobilizing social capital, she gained access to male-dominated networks; and through economic capital, she was able to fund her bold sartorial choices. Her symbolic capital turned her attire into a powerful statement that reshaped her social identity. The woman in men's clothing is not an anomaly but a figure of resistance, one who leveraged systemic advantages to carve out a space for herself in a society that tried to restrict her agency^[22]. This figure exemplifies how, even within strict hierarchies, capital can be harnessed as a tool for liberation.

6. Discussion

The analysis of agency in the three Tang Dynasty female figurines reveals a nuanced interplay between privilege and resistance, framed through Bourdieu's concept of capital. These women strategically mobilized various forms of capital, economic, social, cultural, and symbolic, to assert autonomy. Yet, their agency remained bound by patriarchal structures, offering insight into the complex relationship between individual empowerment and systemic constraint. Acts of defiance, while pushing the boundaries of gender norms, did not dismantle the broader hierarchies that structured Tang society.

Economic capital, exemplified by luxurious textiles, imported dyes, and elaborately embroidered garments, enabled performative resistance. The figurines dressed in male attire with gold-thread robes reflect not only wealth but self-representation and agency in public identity construction. Empress Wu Zetian's strategic use of imperial regalia to emulate male rulers underscores how material capital could be deployed to challenge gender conventions^[22,38]. However, this form of agency was largely confined to elite women. Economic power enabled limited resistance, yet simultaneously reinforced class-based hierarchies^[34].

Cultural capital, expressed through literary sophistication, fashion innovation, and cosmopolitan tastes, also enabled symbolic disruption of Confucian norms. Hu-style fashion and cross-dressing in scholar robes challenged gendered visual codes^[36]. Women like Tao Xue, who hosted literary salons, translated intellectual capital into social influence^[12]. Yet these acts often remained legible within patriarchal cultural frameworks and were celebrated more as signs of imperial cosmopolitanism than as critiques of gendered inequality^[49]. The Tri-colored Sitting Figure exemplifies this tension. While it valorizes beauty and grace, qualities aligned with feminine cultural capital, it simultaneously reinforces passive femininity as a desirable trait. Rather than depicting active political or intellectual engagement, the figure represents a gendered aesthetic ideal. Thus, while cultural capital enabled symbolic agency, it often reproduced restrictive norms^[34].

Social capital, accumulated through elite networks and courtly visibility, further extended women's agen-

cy. The equestrian figurine embodies engagement in male-dominated spheres, such as polo and diplomatic rituals^[8]. Participation in these spaces enabled alliance-building and indirect political influence, as seen in the careers of women like Tao Xue^[50]. However, such mobility was usually mediated by male kinship structures, emphasizing women's relational rather than independent standing^[36].

Symbolic capital, conveyed through gender-transgressive attire and court fashion, functioned as a strategic challenge to patriarchal codes. Women who adopted male garments performed a visual rhetoric of authority and parity^[35]. Yet, their recognition remained tethered to patriarchal narratives. These symbolic disruptions were reframed as reflections of the Tang Dynasty's openness rather than structural critiques^[49]. Thus, symbolic capital offered visibility and voice, but rarely systemic transformation.

Narrative analysis offers powerful tools for understanding how these figurines serve as culturally embedded stories of agency. Rather than treating them as static artifacts, narrative methods allow us to interpret them as visual narratives shaped by institutional, political, and aesthetic discourses^[13,15]. Through this lens, each figurine becomes a 'storied object,' revealing not only women's negotiated identities but also the discursive boundaries of what could be imagined or represented within patriarchal culture.

Despite their strategic mobilization of intersecting forms of capital, the women represented in these figurines remained embedded in deeply patriarchal structures^[8,9]. Confucian ideologies, Tang legal codes (Tanglv Shuyi), and ancestral practices limited women's rights in property, marriage, and public life^[50,51]. Even when women like Xuanji Yu or Tao Xue achieved cultural recognition, their legacies were often refracted through ideals of femininity and virtue^[52].

Although these elite women engaged in acts of resistance, their agency was mediated by access to capital and social status. Their narratives of empowerment often aligned with patriarchal ideals, beauty, obedience, or motherhood, rather than disrupting them^[52]. As such, their agency was contingent, negotiated, and partial. While capital enabled resistance, narrative analysis reveals that these moments of empowerment were framed, preserved, and interpreted in ways that sustained existing hierarchies.

7. Conclusions

This study explores the agency of Tang Dynasty women through the lens of capital, analyzing three figurines: women in makeup, on horseback, and in men's clothing, as narrative artifacts to understand how women navigated patriarchal structures. Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of cultural, social, and symbolic capital, the figurines are examined not merely as static objects but as embodied narratives that encode gendered performances and power relations within the visual and material artifacts of the Tang Dynasty.

One of the central findings is that agency in the Tang Dynasty was a negotiated and contingent process, shaped by women's strategic deployment of available forms of capital. The figurine of the woman in makeup exemplifies the use of cultural capital through adherence to beauty ideals that aligned with elite status. Her refined appearance, while reinforcing conventional femininity, also communicated social value and self-fashioning. Similarly, the equestrian figure symbolizes social capital, participation in elite, male-dominated activities such as polo or diplomacy, made possible through kinship networks or proximity to court life. The woman in male attire represents a form of symbolic capital, where cross-dressing became a visual rhetoric of authority and intellectual parity, albeit still legible within acceptable gender transgressions of the period.

One limitation of the study is that the figurines analyzed predominantly represent noblewomen, as they were the most commonly depicted in the museum's collection. Consequently, the experiences and agency of lower-status women, whose lives might have been shaped by different socioeconomic constraints, are underrepresented in this study.

The creativity of this research lies in its interdisciplinary integration of sociological theory and narrative inquiry to reinterpret Tang Dynasty figurines as narrative embodiments of gendered agency. By treating visual artifacts as storied cultural texts, narrative analysis reveals how women's intellectual, aesthetic, and social expressions were simultaneously enabled and constrained by patriarchal norms^[15]. This method captures the ambiguity and complexity of historical subjectivities, emphasizing that agency is not merely resistance or conformity, but a

negotiated performance situated within specific cultural and material narratives^[14]. Narrative analysis thus allows for a deeper interrogation of how economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital shaped women's empowerment within hierarchical structures. By uncovering how gender power dynamics were narrated, contested, and reproduced through material forms, the study contributes to feminist scholarship that views identity and agency as historically situated and relationally constructed.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, J.H. and X.T.; literature review, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, J.H., X.T., and Z.Z.; supervision and project administration, J.H. and X.T.; funding acquisition, J.H. and X.T. All authors have read and agreed to the submission and publication of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The photographs of the three figurines used in this study were taken by the authors and have been approved by the ethics committee of Shaanxi History Museum for inclusion in the study and subsequent publication.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AI Usage Statement

The authors used AI-assisted tools (including ChatGPT and Grammarly) solely for language polishing and grammar checking to improve clarity and readability, as the authors are English as a second language writers. These tools were not used to generate any scientific content, research ideas, or conclusions of this manuscript. All conceptualization, analysis, and interpretation were conducted entirely by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the final manuscript.

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