

Da Xiu Shan (女式大袖衫) or “Large-Sleeved Gown”

8th Century China: Tang Dynasty

Introduction

I began researching the clothing of 8th Century China as part of the Epic Timey-Wimey Garb Project, which is a long-term research endeavor in which I am researching and recreating one or more complete outfits from each century that the SCA covers, 6th through 16th, from different regions. I chose China for the 8th Century both in an effort to get out of the western-European bubble and also because I was drawn to the elegance as depicted by Zhou Fang’s paintings.

China's Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD) is considered a high point in Chinese history. Women's clothing of this period went on to influence Japanese and Korean dress, as well as our modern concept of traditional Chinese clothing. The *Da Xiu Shan*, (女式大袖衫) or "Large-Sleeved Gown" was worn in the later part of the Tang Dynasty (8th century), and is depicted worn by several court ladies in a painting by Zhou Fang. The Large-Sleeved Gown as depicted by Zhou consists of a skirt (裙, *qun*) tied at the breast, a diaphanous shirt with large sleeves, and a *pibo* (ribbon) draped over the arms. The outfit is finished with an elaborate, high bun decorated with hairpins and peonies. Tang women wore shoes with tipped-up, "phoenix head" toes, which are evident in Zhou's painting given the folds of the skirts.

The Tang Dynasty was a peak period in Chinese civilization, where the country was open to the outside world, tolerant and appreciative of different cultures¹. This era of abundance and a more relaxed social atmosphere provided the opportunity for cultural development, wherein which China’s arts such as poetry, painting, music, and dance thrived². The conservative dress code of earlier periods became more relaxed, and women were allowed to expose their arms and back, as well as wear the clothing of other cultures or even men’s riding garb³.

This entry is an attempt to recreate the Large-Sleeved Gown as depicted in Zhou's painting entitled *Court Ladies Wearing Flowered Headdresses*.

Skirt

The skirt, or *qun* (裙) served as the primary lower garment for women in the Tang Dynasty. This silk skirt can be a solid color or printed with single or multicolored designs. It is made of two panels of fabric sewn together and tied at the breast to create voluminous silhouette. In the Zhou Fang painting, *Lady with Servants* or *Lady with Fan* [Fig. 1], the skirt is worn above the breast. This style is also seen in the Zhang Xuan painting *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk* [Fig. 2]. It is my belief that the women in Zhou Fang's painting, *Court Ladies Wearing Flowered Headdresses* [Figs. 3 and 4], are wearing skirts with a wider band as opposed to exposing their upper undergarment, which became a fashion in the late 9th century⁴. It is also clear that at least one of these ladies is wearing two skirts, or a layered skirt. The pomegranate-colored skirt, which was popular in the Tang Dynasty, is also heavily featured in Zhou’s *Court Ladies Wearing Flowered Headdresses*.

¹ Mei, 2011, p. 25

² *ibid*, p. 26

³ *ibid*.

⁴ Ling, S. 12 Dec 2012

Large-Sleeved Gown

The *Da Xiu Shan* (女式大袖衫) or large-sleeved gown (Figure 1), evolved out of the Tang Dynasty’s primary upper garment, the shirt, or *ru* (襦). The shirt was worn under the skirt, as seen in Figures 2 and 3. The diaphanous large-sleeved gown was a result women’s fashion moving progressively away from earlier Confucian ideals⁵. The shirt belted at the waistline⁶, and the remnant of this can be seen in Zhou Fang’s depiction of the large-sleeved gown, where the gown is tied near the bottom. The large-sleeved gown is made of gauze and worn without any undergarment⁷. The large-sleeved gown is also seen in silk paintings in the Mogao Caves and pottery figurines unearthed from two Tang Dynasty era tombs⁸.

Period Methods and Materials

Fabrics

The primary fabrics used for clothing in the Tang Dynasty were silk, wool, and linen⁹. Other bast fibers were used to produce textiles, such as hemp, raime, and kudzu¹⁰. The Bureau of Weaving and Dyeing in the Tang Dynasty capital, Changan, classified textiles into ten types, eight of which were silks defined by their weave¹¹. Woven silks in the Tang Dynasty included gauzes (*sha*), crepes (*gu*), lenos (*luo*), damasks (*qi*), single-colored twill (*ling*), brocades (*jin*), tapestry (*kesi*), and multicolored pile cloths¹². Tang Dynasty names for various silks were based on where they were woven, design pattern, function, or color, and the sampling included here is a broad listing of the principal types¹³. The skirts in Zhou's painting are a single color or block printed, as are the lighter colored large-sleeved gowns.

Colors and Design

Colors, designs, and even textures were more varied than in previous dynasties¹⁴. Garnet or pomegranate colored skirts were the most popular, but purple, yellow, and green were also very common¹⁵. As larger pieces of clothing, such as skirts, were usually a plain or figured weave, they were often printed with a design¹⁶. This is evident in the Zhou painting, as half of the ladies are wearing an outer skirt of a solid color. The outer and inner skirts with designs feature large, repeated floral roundels which could easily be the result of block or *jiaxie* printing. *Jiaxie* printing involves folding the fabric and then clamping it between two carved wooden boards which are mirror images of each other and which have holes that allow dye to reach the fabric¹⁷. Block printing was used in China as early as the 2nd century BCE, as evident by a bronze stamp found in the tomb of the King of Nanyue in Guangzhou,

⁵ Shaorong, 2004, p. 27

⁶ Ling, S. 22 Nov 2012.

⁷ Zhou & Gao, 1987, p. 94

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Benn, 2002, p. 98

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 99.

¹² Vainker, 2004, p. 85

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Zhou & Gao, 1987, p.77

¹⁵ Shaorong, 2004, p. 5

¹⁶ Vainker, 2004, p. 98

¹⁷ *ibid*, p. 84

which was used to print gauze¹⁸. In the Tang Dynasty, printing fabric with stamps became much more refined, allowing dyers to print multicolored designs with the use of multiple stamps¹⁹. There are several extant pleated skirts with printed decoration which match skirts depicted in paintings and sculpture, but the latter tend to soften the pleats²⁰. Fabric dyes were derived from and plant, animal, and mineral sources, and were capable of producing a wide range of colors; over forty categories of fabric color are listed in Tang Dynasty records²¹. The Song of Yanying in May includes an account of the popular pomegranate-colored skirt, describing how when the trees were in bloom, every household with a young girl was buying the flowers in order to dye fabric²².

Dimensions

Though a number of extant textiles have been found in tombs dating to the Tang Dynasty, there was no standard length of silk for a bolt; however, records indicate that 60 cm (approximately 23.5 inches) was common²³.

Construction Techniques

Skirt

Skirts in the Eastern Han Dynasty (ca 25-229 CE) was comprised of two pieces tied around the front and the back. The construction of skirts evolved into one piece, but still tied onto the body. Accordion pleated skirts²⁴ later became the fashion, and Sui and Tang Dynasty pleats were made wider in the pursuit of the more voluminous figure²⁵. In the Tang Dynasty, the skirt moved from being tied at the natural waist to the bust as far as directly under the armpits, again in an attempt to create the desired silhouette²⁶. The Beijing Opera's pleated skirt pattern uses knife pleats which go in opposite directions from the middle of the band to which they are sewn²⁷. The skirt is described as being in one piece that is tied onto the body. Based on both period images and modern images that have come out of the rise in *hanfu* (clothing of the Han people) popularity in China, I believe that the skirt is made of two panels with side seams that reach most of the way up to the band. The skirt is split down about four inches to allow it to be wrapped around the body - first the back, then the front. The back is tied with a shorter, ribbon-like tie. The front is then tied on by crossing its longer ribbons in the back, then twisting them at the front to allow them to hang at the side of the breasts rather than at the center of the chest. This accounts for the ties not always being visible in paintings such as Zhou's, as well as Zhang Xuan's *Court Ladies Preparing Silk* - they become obscured by the ribbon (*pibo*). It is also reflected in modern recreations of this style of skirt²⁸.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p. 52

¹⁹ Benn, 2002, p. 100

²⁰ Vainker, 2004, p. 106.

²¹ *ibid*, p. 84

²² Mei 2011, p. 29

²³ Vainker, 2004, p. 97

²⁴ Shaorong, 2004, p. 31

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 44

²⁶ *ibid*, p. 31

²⁷ Bonds, 2008, p. 303

²⁸ H. C. [user25056]. (2014, May 3.)

A Note on the Pibo

Women in the Tang Dynasty wore a variety of capes after the popularity of the short-sleeved jacket declined²⁹. One of these capes was the *pibo*, or "ribbon", which was a long narrow strip of silk worn draped over the shoulders from back to front³⁰.

The *pibo* in Zhou Fang's painting are decorated with what appear to be floral motifs, though one lady's *pibo* features cranes as well. This decoration could have been painted, woven, embroidered, given the amount of color and the dimensions³¹.

I did not construct a *pibo* for this garment due to time constraints and my skill level. Pibos may have been painted, woven, or embroidered with decorative patterns. I purchased three yards of silk/cotton blend kimono fabric that was 14" wide and featured a dyed pattern of red flowers. I felt that this motif was similar to what I could make out of the *pibo* worn by one of the ladies in Zhou Fang's painting (Figure 4). This garment's silhouette is not complete without the *pibo*, so I did not feel comfortable leaving it out entirely.

Other Accessories and Style Notes

The tips of the shoes can be seen in Zhou Fang's painting, and are known as phoenix-toed shoes. This style began in the Han Dynasty, and shoe tips grew longer and longer as time progressed³². These light and delicate shoes were made of flax or cattail stems³³.

Women in the Tang Dynasty wore a variety of elaborate hairstyles, accented with hairpins made of gold and precious gems³⁴.

Materials and Methods Used

Materials

Skirt

I theorize that the skirts depicted in Zhou's painting were made of a silk twill. This is in accordance with the research³⁵ and would allow for the flow and drape shown in the painting, and would be lightweight enough for summer wear. Given the pairing of the skirts with the diaphanous gauze "large-sleeved gown", it is a reasonable assumption that the scene depicted is set during a warmer season. The skirt was made with five yards of 45" wide, 12 momme silk twill purchased from Dharma Trading Company and then dyed with liquid Rit Dye's "Wine" color. The band was cut from the same cloth as the skirt after dyeing. The ribbon for the skirt is 1.5" wide woven silk ribbon, dyed with Rit Dye colors "Golden Yellow" and "Taupe" to achieve the "Honey Gold" color. I used metal hand sewing needles and Gutermann silk thread in color 890 ("Coral") for the skirt. I used Gutermann silk thread in color 722 ("Sand") to finish the edges of the ribbon.

²⁹ Zou & Gao, 1987, p. 77

³⁰ Shaorong, 2004, p. 32-33.

³¹ Vainker, 2004, p. 87

³² Mei, 2011, p. 24

³³ *ibid*, p. 34-35.

³⁴ Zhou & Gao, 1987, p. 77

³⁵ Vainker, 2004, p. 98

Large-Sleeved Gown

The only clear option for the large-sleeved gown was silk gauze, given the extant stamp used to pattern it and the diaphanous nature depicted in Zhou Fang's painting. I purchased ten yards of 45" wide silk gauze from Dharma Trading Company. I used Gutermann silk thread in color 800 ("White") and hand-sewing needles. I used a Speedball Speedy-Cut and Speedball carving tools to cut my printing block. I used a 2" hard rubber brayer and a CraftSmart brand pigment ink pad in White to ink the block.

Production

Skirt

After pre-washing the silk twill, I dyed it using the sink method using Rit Dye's "Wine" color. I then cut off an approximately 10 by 45 inch piece which I then cut in half so that each piece was approximately 10 by 22.5 inches. I oriented the fabric so that the 45 inch width served as its length and I was pleating a selvedge edge. Based on the paintings and what is apparent from modern reconstructions of Tang Dynasty dress, I believe that soft knife pleats are a reasonable interpretation.

After cutting the skirt pieces by cutting my remaining fabric in half, I pleated the front and back panels. I marked the center with a pin and then created one inch knife pleats starting from the center and going out so that the sides mirrored each other. I then secured these pleats using a backstitch and the silk thread.

I created a rolled hem on the cut edges of the band pieces and stitched them down using a whip stitch. I used a veil stitch to on all of the skirt's selvedge edges to finish them before doing any construction.

I then centered the dyed ribbon inside the folded band panels and tacked down it down at the edges so that it would stay in place. With the ribbon in place, I then stitched the band pieces to the skirt pieces. The back skirt piece has a short ribbon, while the front piece's ribbon is much longer.

At this point, I tried the skirt on both myself and my dress form and became concerned about the band not staying in place. It would flop down a little as opposed to lying flat against the chest. With the skirt on the dress form, I pinned the top edges of the band together where they overlapped under the arms and tacked them with a few whip stitches. This worked moderately well to solve the problem, but I believe a different pattern shape for the band and possibly positioning the ribbon at the band's fold as opposed to the pleats may produce better results.

I machine stitched the side seams after pinning them together from the selvedge edge of the fabric that would be the hem to 18" from the ribbons.

Large-Sleeved Gown

I had previously patterned a shirt, or *ru* (襦), and so used this as the basis for my large-sleeved gown pattern. My research indicated that the sleeves of the large-sleeved gown could exceed four feet³⁶, so I made my sleeves four feet wide from the upper fold to the seam along the cuff edge. I pinned the

³⁶ Zhou & Gao, 1987, p. 94

pattern pieces to the gauze and cut with pinking shears. The gauze was difficult to cut, and in future, I will experiment with using spray-on, wash-out starches to stabilize it.

Once the pattern pieces were cut, I finished all the cut edges with a veil stitch. Once the edges were finished, I laid the pieces out on a protective surface and printed them with the stamp I had carved, re-inking the stamp between each print. I staggered the print using the length and width of my hand to measure. To set the ink, I placed the pieces ink-side down on a towel and ironed them from the back. I then put them in the dryer on a low setting for approximately 15 minutes.

I then sewed the pieces together using a backstitch and the white silk thread. Again, this was difficult to do with the silk gauze. In the future, stabilizing the gauze with starch may be helpful in order to get straighter, more even stitches.

Variations between Period and Reproduction

Since China was a major silk producer, it could be assumed that fabrics for garments to be worn by noble women would have been woven to the width required. Extant bolts of fabric found in tombs are less than 25 inches wide³⁷. I do not believe this is a solid enough piece of evidence to go on for the dimensions of the fabric, especially give the volume of the skirts and sleeves as depicted by Zhou Fang.

I used Rit dyes and commercially produced pigment inks to color my fabrics because they were easy for me to find and use. In period, natural dyes such as pomegranate would have been used to dye and print fabrics for garments³⁸.

There is no extant large-sleeved gown or skirt that I have been able to find in my research, so period construction techniques have to be inferred from what technology was available. I have two machine sewn seams in the skirt, which would have been hand-sewn in period. I did these seams on the machine for stability, since my hand-sewing skills need improvement.

Looking again at the images of Zhou Fang's painting, the side-seam for the large sleeved gown is split at the bottom. This may improve movement in the gown, as with no gores and having it sewn all the way down makes taking a natural stride difficult. I also needed to not stitch the neck band down as far, in order to have the ties higher as shown in both Figures 1 and 4.

Block printing was used to pattern silk gauze, but the blocks would have been either metal or wood³⁹. I do not have any metal or wood fabrication skills, so I opted to carve my stamp using techniques that would be easier for me to learn in the time frame. I would like to carve my own wood blocks for printing in the future.

The Finished Garment

The skirt that I produced does not have the volume of the skirts in Zhou Fang's painting. Since I used the width of the fabric for its length, I believe a wider fabric would give me a more voluminous skirt and a

³⁷ Vainker, 2004, p. 97

³⁸ Mei, 2011, p. 29; Vainker, 2004, p. 97

³⁹ Vainker, 2004, p. 52

more accurate silhouette. Dharma Trading Company only carries silk twill in a 45" width, but perhaps a habotai silk would work well, especially if used to produce to skirts as shown in Figure 5.

The issues with the skirt's band could be solved by changing the shape of the front piece. I was limited by what I could do based on the amount of silk I purchased and dyed, but I will in future experiment with a convex top line to the band. This may help it lie flatter against the chest. I would also like to experiment with printing fabric for the skirt.

Silk gauze is extremely difficult to cut and sew. Since I did not use any starch to stabilize the gauze when making the large-sleeved gown, I want to try this method in the future. I also may experiment with machine finishing the cut edges so that it is easier to sew, then finish seams by hand.

I really like how the printing came out, and I'm curious as to how ink designed specifically for fabric printing and a larger brayer would work.

Other period depictions of the *Da Xiu Shan* imply that either the *hezi* (an undergarment) is visible, or some other decorative fabric is worn underneath the skirt, which is tied below the bust (Figure 6). I still do not think that the women depicted in Zhou Fang's painting are wearing this style, but the copious other depictions of it make it clear that it did exist. I have yet to find good citations for the period depictions of this specific style, but I would nonetheless like to explore it in the future.

Figures



Figure 1: A depiction of the Da Xiu Sha, or "Large-Sleeved Gown" based on the painting "Beauties with Flowery Hairpins" and silk paintings unearthed in Dunhuang, from Zhou and Gao's *5000 Years of Chinese Costume*.



Figure 2: Zhou Fang (c. 730-800) painting, *Lady with Servants* or *Lady with Fan*, detail

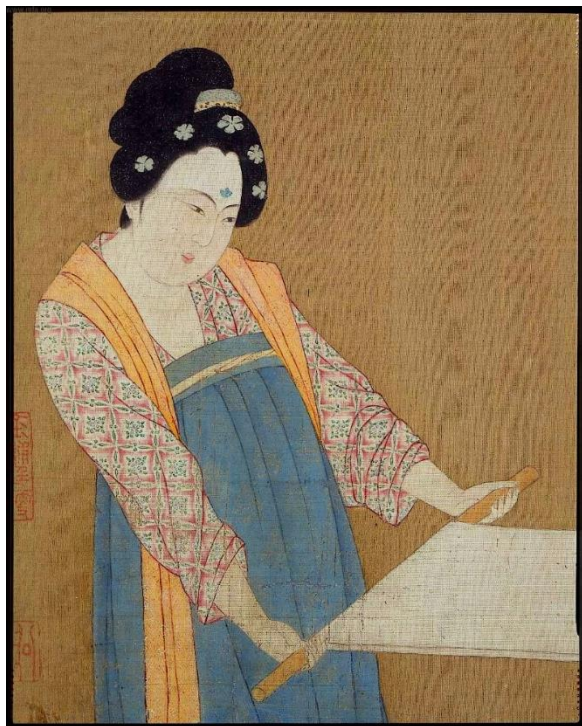


Figure 3: Zhang Xuan (713-755) painting, *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk*, detail



Figure 4: Zhou Fang
(730-c. 800) painting,
*Court Ladies Wearing
Flowered
Headdresses*, detail



Figure 5: Zhou Fang (730-c. 800) painting, *Court Ladies Wearing Flowered Headdresses*, detail



Figure 6: Figurine at Xi'an Shaanxi History Museum wearing the *Da Xiu Shan*, from Wikipaida Commons.

Appendix: Process Photos



Skirt piece pleated and secured with hand-sewn backstitch.



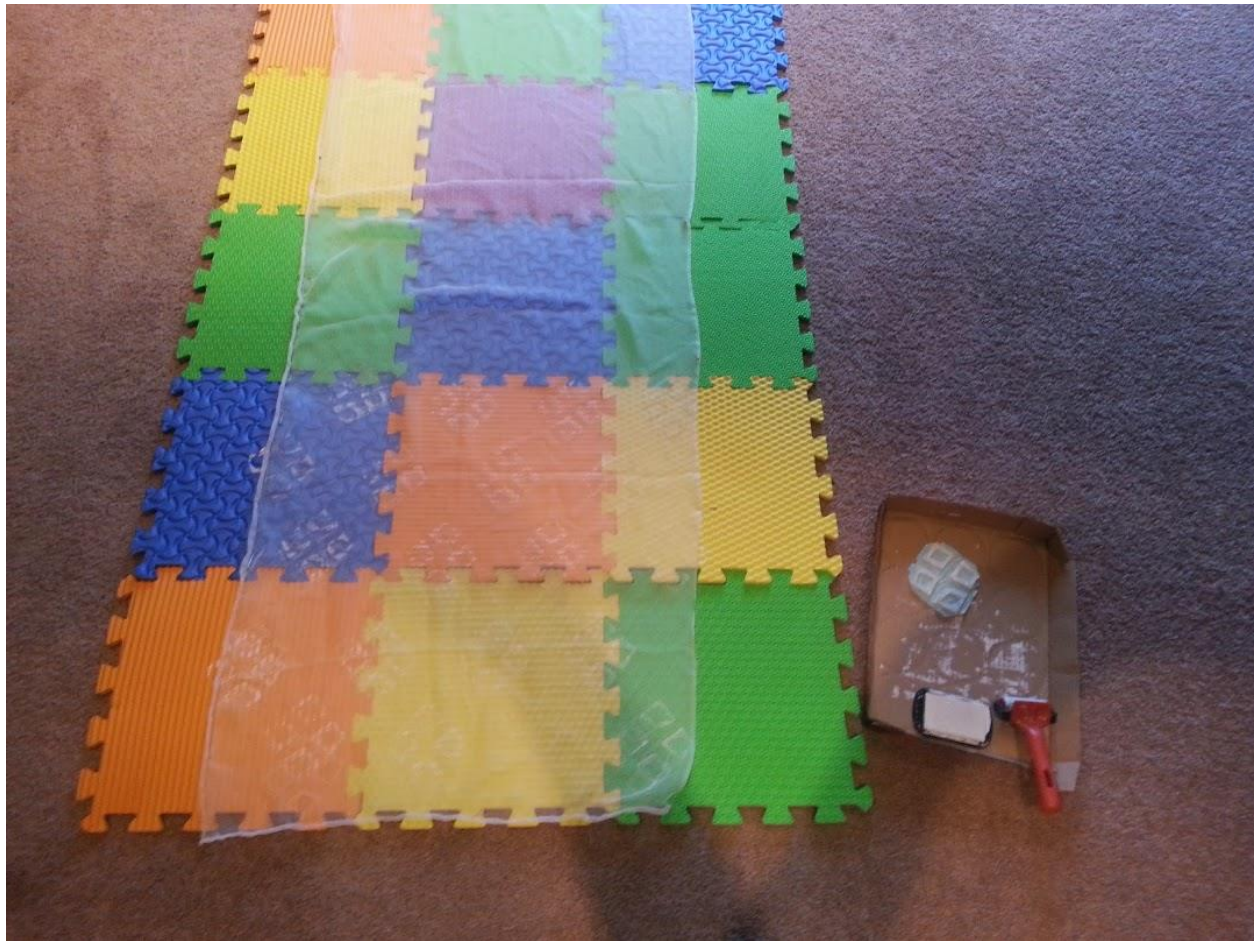
Skirt band pieces in the middle of edge-finishing.



Skirt piece with ribbon attached with hand-sewn backstitch.



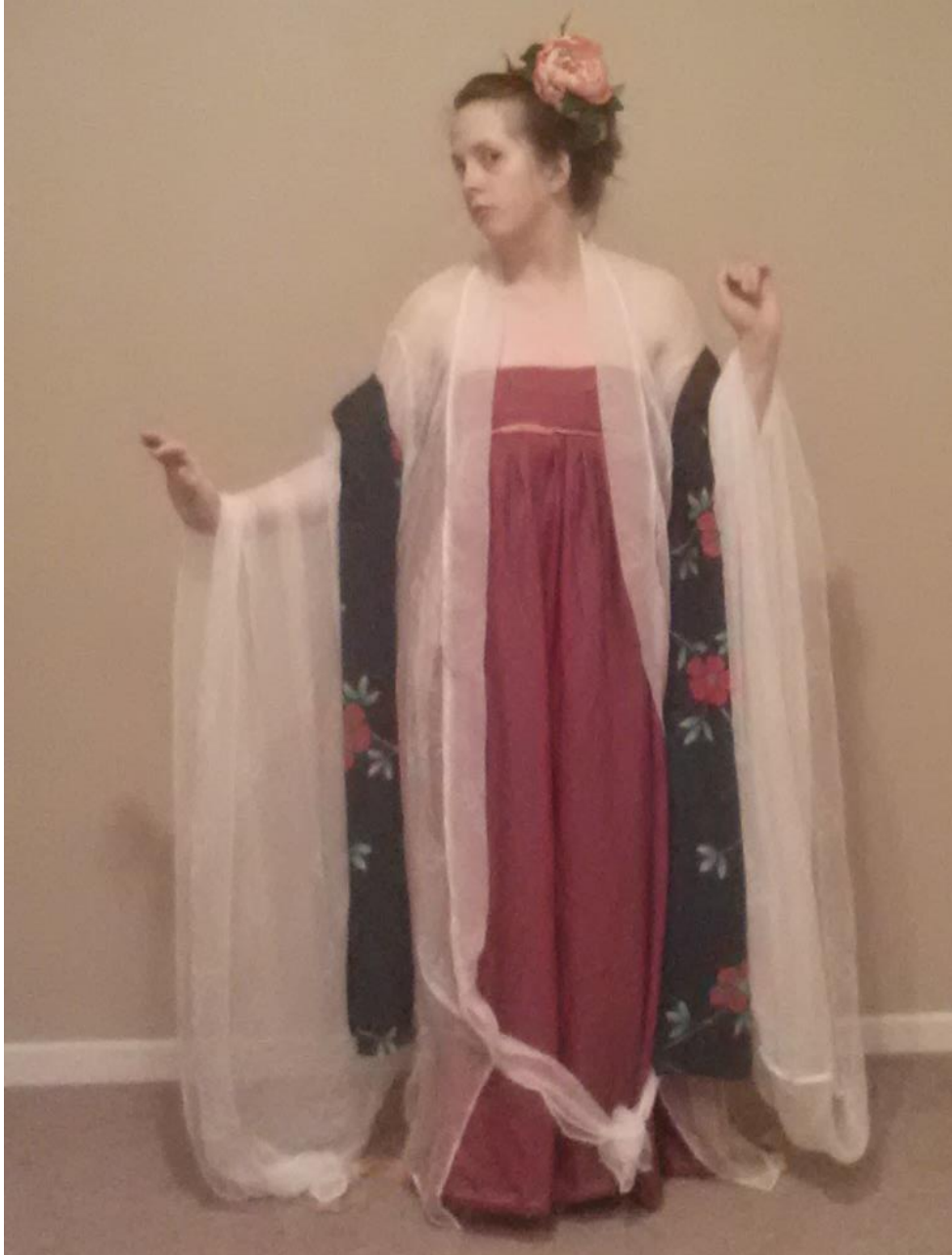
Pattern pieces for large-sleeved gown.



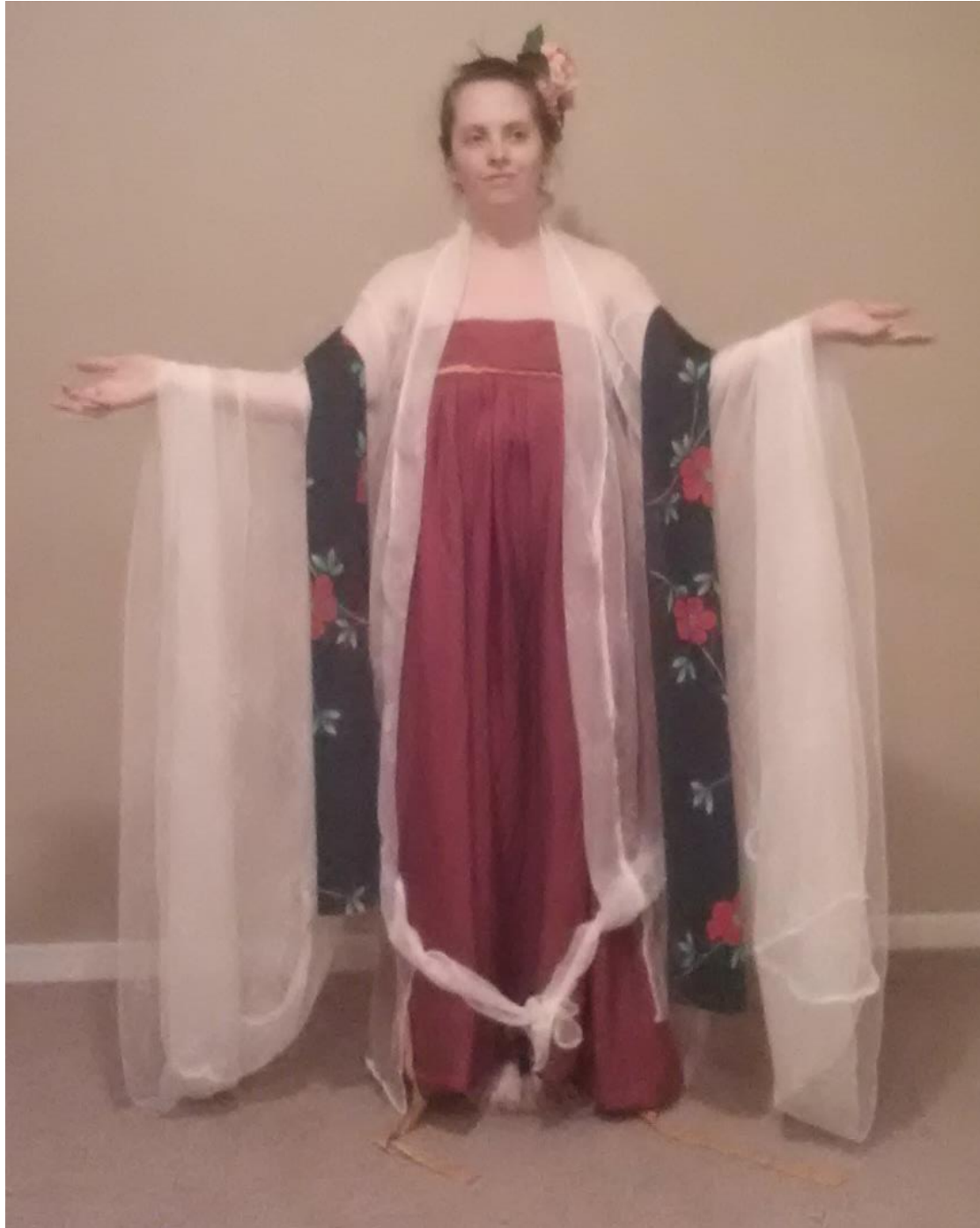
Block printing silk gauze.



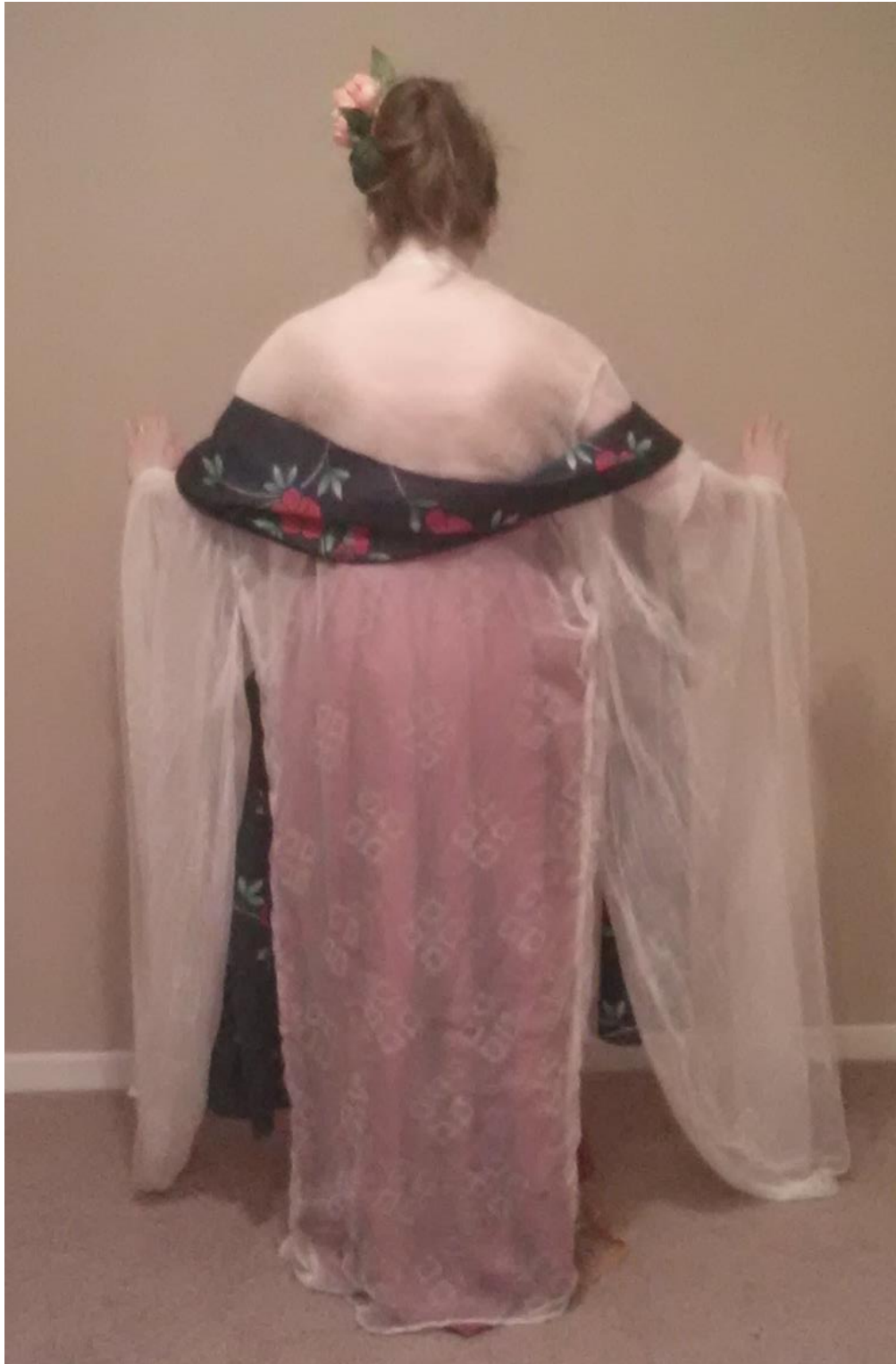
Body piece of large-sleeve gown block printed and resting.



Modeling the finished outfit – attempt at period pose.



Modeling the finished outfit, front view.



Modeling the finished outfit, back view.

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Contact Information

Lady Leah Jolifaunt of Schattentor
MKA Marti Fuerst
fuerstme@gmail.com
<http://biblionalia.info/leah>

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