

Seesaw Girl ... an excerpt

The maidservants usually laundered most of the clothes for the household, but the Han women and girls did the important ceremonial clothes, and Jade's mother herself took care of her husband's clothing. His outfits were considered too important to be entrusted to the servants or younger women.

First, all the soiled clothes were ripped apart along the seams and hems. Everyone knew that flat pieces of cloth could be more thoroughly cleaned and smoothly pressed than the garments themselves. Once the clothes had been ripped apart, they were washed and hung to dry.

Then the dried clothes were beaten to get rid of all the wrinkles. Jade hated this part most of all. The flat pieces of cloth were laid on a stone and beaten with the two round wooden sticks. Jade had to pound at the clothes until her arms ached and her hands were sore. The tattoo beat of laundry sticks sounded constantly in the Han house, sometimes even into the night. Finally, the clothes were sewn back together again.

Wearing clean clothes daily was a luxury only the wealthy could afford. Jade's mother and aunts saw to it that the members of the Han family were always clothed in a manner worthy of their place in society. There were times like today, as she bent for hours over the sticks, when Jade thought a lower place in society and a little less laundry would not be such a bad thing.

