

## **Examining the Rise of Hanfu (汉服) in Young People**

The Hanfu Movement, a movement of wearing historical or traditional dress of the Han majority population has seen rapid growth and development: emerging from complex and interconnected factors into a subculture of its own and with its own internal struggles. Beginning as a movement after the 2001 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in China where the question of national dress and identity began, the discussion moved online and was incubated by nationalist or Han ethnicist groups whose ideology stresses the return to traditional cultural norms and values as a solution to issues born of modern living. Transversing the barrier between the digital and the real and becoming a solidified entity after November 2003 where in Zhengzhou Weng Letian wore self-made Hanfu, which was mistaken for the Japanese Kimono or the Korean Hanbok. However, the roots of the movement can also be seen in rising access and consumption of popular culture mediums that have influenced popular imagination and allow for the quick dissemination of ideas or produce. With the rise of Television Dramas, of particular interest being the rising subgenre of historical dramas, known as diwang ju (帝王剧) or huangdi ju (皇帝剧) (translatable as emperor dramas), setting the cultural landscape and the internet being a platform of great multifunction, allowing for users to share or participate in research or discussions, showcase their collections, sell stock or organise events and associations which in turn publicise their activities. The internet also contributes to shifting trends within the subculture by allowing for the dissemination of information relating to foreign fashion styles that were an influence such as the Kimono, Hanbok or Western Cosplay. Self-identification on an ethnic, community or aesthetic ground are also of interest as Hanfu events allow for the meeting of large numbers of individuals with a shared commonality, these individuals having more disposable income due to economic development which contributes to their ability to self-actualize. Therefore, there exists three broad and interconnected factors in the growth of Hanfu: 1) Economic 2) Telecommunications 3) Community engagement and Self-actualisation. Community disagreements on what can be considered Hanfu, and production concerns are major limiting factors on the further development of traditional dress as a market and cultural phenomenon and it will be interesting to see how the situation continues to unfold.

### **Background and Economic Development:**

Hanfu is a non-academically defined catch-all term for all historical clothing that existed before the Qing dynasty's overthrow of the Ming Dynasty in 1696 and subsequent banning of clothing from previous dynasties and introduction of the Qipao style along with the more flexible aspect where the clothing is adapted to modern trends and material conditions. It is however markedly making a comeback as will be explored further later, Hanfu enthusiasts or "tong pao" (同袍) known hereafter engage in a full breadth of historical clothing available from the Tang dynasty to the Ming with some adopting to shorten the length of sleeves or dresses due to the inconvenience caused when engaging in modern activities, with some being gendered and others not depending on historical context. Tongpao are almost exclusively 25 and under, constituting undergrads, postgrads and young professionals. Under the guise of elements identified and explained by Yangchom clothing and fashion are not interchangeable terms, clothing by its nature is not inherently subject to the necessity of change as its defining characteristic (due to the need to promote constant consumption). Instead, clothing changes and develops overtime through market mechanisms and the incorporation of external influences, be they the demands of modern conditions or tastes

adapted from foreign cultural sources<sup>1</sup>. Coinciding with continued economic growth the Hanfu Market is a growing one too, originating in 2005 with the appearance of the first online store whereas in 2019 there were 1,888 active Hanfu sites, enough competition to encourage producers to seek copyright protections and even to administer an app to spot fraudulent Hanfu which circumvented design costs by simply sending pre-made designs by other companies to factories<sup>2 3</sup>. During the early days of the movement clothing production was limited to a handful of skilled individuals, who naturally had their topics of interest and orders would take more than 2 months to complete and, in some cases, production had to restart several times due to new discoveries made when physically employing authentic techniques in the production process<sup>4</sup>. The first physical store was established in 2006, in Chengdu City under the trademark Chong Hui Han Tang whilst still using online retailers to help distribute their products. Post 2006, The Hanfu movement has continued to solidify itself through organisational work and co-operation with local governments, one prominent example of such being the restructuring of the tourist industry of Xiwu county, the Yuntai Ancient Town. A new attraction specifically catering to the tastes of the youth, incorporating several aspects of representative of a Han revival in response to growing interest in traditional cultural expressions such as archery, tea ceremony, Hanfu, hair and makeup. Tourism as a wider phenomenon has seen more focus on a state level as governments of all levels seek to boost income through tourism, demonstrable as tourism as a proportion of GDP saw year-on-year increases between 2015 and 2018 where it returned to 2006 levels. However, experiencing a decrease of 1.7% from 2018 to 2019<sup>5</sup>(with the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak having an impact upon the performance of this sector). The growing popularity of Hanfu and the Han revival therefore is likely to have a beneficial impact upon tourism within China, if these trends are catered too, tourism can also open the public up to Hanfu through the recent development of rented Hanfu thus increasing public awareness and the likelihood of further expansion of the customer base. Rented Hanfu costs RMB 200 for a single day experience which mediates one of the prime barriers to continued growth of the subculture; its prohibitive cost of entry. At present the Hanfu market has boomed currently seeing revenues of RMB4.5 billion in the previous year, when in 2015 this figure was RMB190 million<sup>6</sup>. Despite large growth, Hanfu is a relatively small contributor to the overall Chinese clothing market which stands at around RMB2.15

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<sup>1</sup> Dicky Yangzom, Clothing and Social Movements: The Politics of Dressing in Colonised Tibet, Master's Thesis, Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies, The City University of New York 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Wang Xiyi, Francois Colbert, Renaud Legoux, "From Niche Interest to Fashion Trend: Hanfu Clothing as a Rising Industry in China", International Journal of Arts Management, Vol 23, issue 1, 2020, pp 79-89.

<sup>3</sup> Girl City, "Hanfu Boom EP4: Knockoff Hanfu"

<sup>4</sup> Jiaxuan Xu, "Exploring Hanfu: Interweaving Tradition and Youth Culture", Master of Arts Thesis, Fashion, Clothing and Textile Design, Aalta University 2019.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/249780/growth-of-travel-and-tourism-industrys-direct-contribution-to-gdp-in-china/#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20the%20contribution%20of,in%20China's%20inbound%20tourism%20industry.>

<sup>6</sup> Girl City, "Hanfu Boom: EP 1 | The Revival | Girl City 汉服飞速发展背后的原因是什么？记者跟拍汉服出行日，传统射艺队，找寻汉服对于华人世界的意义《汉服驾到》第一集：复兴汉服"  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAIGHBCM\\_go](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAIGHBCM_go)

billion<sup>7</sup> accounting for only 0.00024% of the total trade in the clothing market, and will continue to increase its market share as public awareness and popularity increase. The Chinese economy has seen remarkable growth since the Reform and Opening Period in the 1970's, according to statistics provided by the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the nation's GDP has increased from RMB 67.9 billion in 1952 to RMB 90 trillion in 2019, which in per capita terms is RMB119 in 1952 to RMB64,644 in 2018 or in terms of average per capita disposable income rose from RMB171 in 1978 to RMB28,288 in 2018 as the last figure shows economic development has directly translated into an increase in purchasing power of the average individual within Chinese society, even accounting for uneven distribution. This increase in disposable income therefore means that more people have the ability to purchase Hanfu and further public awareness of the community, if they weren't already doing so online by following and sharing the works of key opinion leaders (KOL) or models, or distributing historical materials. Thus, with the development of the economy individuals have more purchasing power to interact with Hanfu either by purchasing or renting the physical product, by becoming a tourist or by purchasing an electronic device, with which awareness can be spread, events organised and tourist destinations selected.

### **Telecommunications:**

Television (TV) first came to the PRC in the 1950's, becoming a symbol of modernisation in the Reform and Opening Period rather than an exclusive commodity with 463,000 sets nationwide by 1976.<sup>8</sup> Constituting 2% of the contemporaneous population, the number had increased to 47.8% coverage by 1987 and rose again to 91% in 2002, with 1,881 total TV stations nationwide and all the accompanying infrastructures.<sup>9</sup> With this in place programs would be able to be delivered to the majority of the population, programs offered diversified after 2003 since privately-owned stations could then begin to compete with one another, leading to both a greater diversification of display (of particular interest being the historical dramas) and the creation of subgenres (emperor dramas being of note). Some cultural texts would become popularised by being adapted on in historical dramas, such as the Sanguo yanyi (Romance of the three kingdoms) broadcast in 1994, although it was only after the broadcast in 1991 of Xishuo Qianlong (Playful tales of Emperor Qianlong) were emperor dramas created as a separate entity. This then further developed into two categories, Zhenshuo and Xishuo being more or less serious respectively. Both would appeal to audiences for differing aspects, and xishuo with a less serious tone while retaining a judicial, principled core would still provide entertaining pseudo-historical media, independent from an individual's own interest in history thus visual depictions of historical dress (regardless of its situational accuracy) would establish them within cultural consciousness with a particularly profound effect on developing minds. An effect only amplified by the introduction of the internet, which has increased from 230 million users in 2009<sup>10</sup> to 802 million users in June 2018<sup>11</sup>, and the possibilities offered to both the cultural industry and other industries through e-commerce. Oversaturation on platforms like Taobao

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<sup>7</sup> <http://kreakoncept.net/daily-digest/china-to-become-the-worlds-largest-apparel-market-in-2019#:~:text=According%20to%20forecast%20made%20by,from%20%24267%2C246%20million%20in%202014.>

<sup>8</sup> Zhong Xueping, "Mainstream Culture Reformed Television Drama, Society, and the Production Of Meaning in Reform-era China", University of Hawai'i Press. 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-06/08/content\\_9950198.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-06/08/content_9950198.htm)

<sup>11</sup> Wei Shan, Yongxin Gu, Mapping Political Views in Chinese Cyberspace, Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations; Kaohsiung, Vol.5, issue.3, 2019, pp.915-948.

of Hanfu dress has led to a selective process of cultural incorporation of alien cultural features brought about by globalisation, or a simplification of Hanfu to a more casual state in order to stand out and attract custom, the variety then drawing in potential consumers by catering for their tastes or others out of curiosity. Microfilm ranging in lengths of 20 minutes to 15 seconds, with platforms like Weixin, Weibo, and Tik tok allowing for the creation of KOL and their interaction with brands on their own social media, and the widespread demonstration of Hanfu in an easily consumed form. A form that is also used by marketing communicators, with producers connecting to specific audiences through social media platforms such as Tiktok or Kuaishou. Thus, Telecommunications are influenced by the economy as it requires investment to establish the required infrastructure, and in turn contribute heavily to the economy, in 2008 alone internet-related industries generated RMB 650 billion in turnover<sup>12</sup>, whilst also fostering communities with shared interests by allowing the dissemination of ideas and facilitating easy interactions and consumable media.

### **Community and Self-actualisation:**

Community has already briefly been discussed in the context of KOL, distribution of material, and growing public awareness further aspects of community exist however, such as the actual solidification of the Hanfu movement into clubs and associations, celebrations and events, and ideological cyber-battlegrounds. As of 2019 there existed around 2,000 Hanfu associations, an increase from the 1,300 in 2017 <sup>13</sup>their goal being to promote Han culture to people both domestic and overseas, demonstrable through mission statements that emphasise sharing knowledge of the Han ethnicity even with active usage of material culture<sup>14</sup>. Societies are often bilingual; operating in both the native tongue and Chinese, and often separating this through multimedia as the New York Hanfu Corporation does operating in English on Facebook and Chinese on Weixin. Others allow direct participation by locals in events, such as the Singaporean Han Cultural Society or the Hanfu Association of New Zealand, by hosting events such as Duan wu festival they provide an important connector to home for the over 42 million overseas Chinese<sup>15</sup> and by allowing locals to engage in events or workshops they promote Hanfu and Han culture to new audiences, who get to wear Hanfu or even handmade it, although the spread of images from these events is controlled by the association itself (for example the UK Han Culture Association arranges photographers to ensure the release of high-quality photos for professional means whilst members are free to spread images on their own social media, controlling publicity). This is due to controversies sparked over opinions about the significance of authenticity within the Hanfu movement, with harsh enough words being spread to necessitate the adding of a "respecting the opinions of peers" clause to one association's constitution<sup>16</sup>. Cultural conservatives who abhor the modernisation or adaptation of Hanfu share some of their views with an internet group dubbed the 'Imperial Han' by other netizens. The 'Imperial Han' can be defined as a nationalist cluster using platforms such as Han Wang or Hanminzu

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<sup>13</sup> Wang Xinyi, Francois Colbert, Renaud Legoux, "From Niche Interest to Fashion Trend: Hanfu Clothing as a Rising Industry in China", International Journal of Arts Management; Montreal, Vol 23, Issue 1, 2020, pp.79-89

<sup>14</sup> Magdalena Grena-Chen, "Discovering Roots: The Development of the Hanfu Movement Among Chinese Diasphora", In Zuzanna Kopina, Igor Szpatakowski, "China and the Chinese in the Modern World An Interdisciplinary Study", Sfinansowana Ze Srodkow 2020, pp.25-31.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

wang which in 2010 had a membership of 119,000<sup>17</sup>, who perceive Han culture as superior, a reverse to the support seen to Western material culture which was intrinsically linked to modernisation and civilization, and that Han culture represents true "Chineseness", being an avid supporter of Hanfu and orbiting cultural expressions and encourage people to wear pre-Manchu dress. Urging contemporary peers to adopt traditional social thought, religious belief, architecture, dress, language, literature and art, these forums formed the incubator for the original discussions post-APEC 2001. Within the wider population a preference for traditional culture ranked the highest amongst all other reasons for engaging with Hanfu at 87.14%, whereas national consciousness only received 55.19% in a survey conducted by the Hanfu Information Platform<sup>18</sup>. There exists a parallel between the 'Imperial Han' and the Lhakar movement in Tibet. The Lhakar movement is a non-violent subversive political movement where the exact details are beyond this essay's scope, however the movement mostly rallies for an authentic expression of Tibetan culture suppressed during the Cultural Revolution, rather than an image created by forces external to their own control, such as the formation of a romanticised tourist image or a more sinicized image that ignores historical and regional differences, looking at both of these combined it is clear that clothing is instrumental<sup>19</sup> in national identity formation, however it can also be instrumental in the formation of an individual's identity particularly when used on groups with strong ethnic identification. Further, a study by Veena Chattaraman and Sharron J.Lennon on 106 male and female students belonging to minority ethnic groups in the US enrolled at Midwestern University investigated the correlation between ethnic identification and engagement with the material culture of the ethnic group to which the individual belonged, finding a significant positive relationship between a participant's consumption of ethnic material culture and the strength of their ethnic identification<sup>20</sup>. As such the growth in Hanfu in part is due to individual's personal identity and connection with their own ethnicity. However, Hanfu offers quite a unique appearance and therefore an individual's choices purely for aesthetic reasons should not be discarded, referring to the above survey from 2018 63.37% of participants responded with a preference for the style of Hanfu<sup>21</sup>. Beneficial to this is the inherent variety within Hanfu, and the fact that the clothing is divorced from its original socio-political context allows for a wider range of personal expression, an example being the abandonment of a divisional dress code based on rank and gender or the prestige difference

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<sup>17</sup> Matthew M.Chow, Yi Wang, "Online Cultural Conservatism and the Ethnicism in China", Asian Social Science, Vol.8, No.7, June 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Jiaxuan Xu, "Exploring Hanfu: Interweaving Tradition and Youth Culture", Master of Arts Thesis, Fashion, Clothing and Textile Design, Aalta University 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Dicky Yangzhou, "Clothing and Social Movements: The Politics of Dressing in Colonised Tibet, Master's Thesis, Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies, The City University of New York 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Veena Chattaraman, Sharron J.Lennon, "Ethnic Identity, Consumption of Cultural Apparelel, and Self-perception of Ethnic Consumers", Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, Vol.12, No.4, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Jiaxuan Xu, "Exploring Hanfu: Interweaving Tradition and Youth Culture", Master of Arts Thesis, Fashion, Clothing and Textile Design, Aalta University 2019.

between those able to afford coloured dyed clothing and those unable to do so, going even further during the Ming and Qing dynasties the colour yellow and the dragon motif were reserved for the emperor himself. Modern fashion trends, cultural icons, adaptations for convenience, and casual wear will also change Hanfu style as the subculture continues to develop potentially improving its ability to cater to more personal identities and aesthetic tastes. Thus, Community and self-actualisation is also linked to Economic factors and Telecommunications, economically those with more disposable income can more accurately express themselves through their clothing, whether that be an assertion of ethnic identification both domestic and overseas or one's own aesthetic, and Telecommunications links Hanfu associations together with each other and their members allowing for a reduction in diaspora, and loneliness by allowing individuals lead a social life by introducing them to their peers with whom they share some commonality, the spread of cultural material and allows for associations to manage their own image reducing the risk of the publication of 'photo shoot' Hanfu.

#### Conclusion:

As this essay has been attempting to convey the rise of Hanfu cannot be explained away simply by one factor, for instance Han ethnicity, but possibly through three intricate, broad and overlapping categories that examine both the macro and the micro. Of course, for the sake of brevity other significant factors have been dissolved into the other three partially but instead may deserve their own categories one such is history. The loss of a cultural continuity through from the Qing to relatively recent due to the Cultural revolution and importation of Western fashion and cultural elements intrinsically linked to modernisation and advanced society being of major import and the second being policy. Government, by pursuing cultural policies like ethnic dress, even if native cultures believe their own to be sinicized or romanticized, through telecommunications such as the program *National Treasures*, aides public awareness and therefore potential engagement with such.

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