

An Exploration of the Identity of Contemporary Chinese Hanfu Enthusiasts On Chinese Social Platform Weibo

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary China, the Hanfu Movement was initiated to revitalize traditional Chinese clothing and culture. The purpose of this thesis was to examine hanfu's agency in self-expression. This article examined the self-presentation of hanfu bloggers on Weibo, suggesting that hanfu items provide a diverse range of opportunities for expressing one's identity in terms of consumption capacity, cultural capital, and individuality. Through their depiction of the ancient aristocracy, the hanfu enthusiasts demonstrate their ideal selves and the lives they aspire to. Moreover, hanfu can be considered that provide a solution for resolving the contradiction between tradition and modernity through the romantic retrospection of past.

Keywords: Hanfu, Identity, Weibo

1. INTRODUCTION

On 22 November 2003, Letian Wang drew the attention of many passers-by as he walked down the streets of Zhengzhou City, China, wearing the traditional clothing of the Chinese Han people. The special clothing he wore about was Hanfu, the traditional costume of the Han Chinese (the largest ethnic group in China), which had been abolished by the Manchu rulers with the establishment of the Qing Dynasty. A report on Mr Wang and his activity published by the Singaporean newspaper Lianhe Zaobao drew considerable attention from the domestic and international media [1]. Since then, Hanfu started to garner public attention, and the phenomenon of individuals dressing and showcasing Hanfu began to emerge more constantly online and offline. The revival of Hanfu swept throughout China, mostly backed by young Han Chinese. The Hanfu Movement is a socio-cultural movement that seeks to revitalise traditional Chinese culture. Hanfu fans are constantly organizing numerous Hanfu-related events to increase public knowledge of the outstanding ancient culture. Hanfu devotees often wear and show Hanfu in public throughout traditional holiday celebrations and rituals. Also, they aim to raise public awareness of Hanfu through participating in key national or local government-led activities. Additionally, activists in the

Hanfu movement utilize the internet and social media platforms to promote and display Hanfu, to educate people about its history, and to emphasize the significance of Hanfu in transmitting Chinese culture.

According to iiMedia, the number of Hanfu aficionados has surpassed almost two million, with female devotees accounting for more than 80% of the total [2]. The rise of Hanfu has been driven by the cultural policies of the government, the voluntary organization and dissemination of Hanfu enthusiasts, as well as social media and commercial forces. With the booming of media platforms, the creation and dissemination of content related to Hanfu has further increased. Sina Weibo is a Chinese Twitter-like and is the largest among all microblog services in China. From interest groups and communities to social media platforms, the issue of Hanfu has risen beyond niche interest circles to become a major topic of public attention on Weibo. Due to the fast expansion of Hanfu industry, the variety and aesthetics of Hanfu items are progressively rising, while the diverse choices of clothing provides customers with an array of self-expression options.

This article starts with a review of literature relates to clothing and identity, the Hanfu movement, and performance theory. Next, this study conducted a content analysis of a Hanfu Weibo blogger's posts in order to

examine the identity through self-presentation. The significant themes are next analyzed and debated. This paper argues that Hanfu communicates the identity in relation to consumption capacity, taste, and social status. The diversity of Hanfu items provides consumers with a range of self-expression options. Then, it demonstrates how individuals' imitation and performance of ancient Han aristocratic women represented their ideal selves and lifestyles. Finally, this paper suggests that Hanfu acts as a link between the person and an ideal past. The recalling of tradition conveys a personal yearning for the poetic way of life of the ancient literati, presenting a kind of contradiction with modern life.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Hanfu movement is thought to have originated from the Chinese Han people's need for cultural identity in the context of globalization. Many early research elaborated on the contribution of Hanfu as a carrier for nationalist sentiment and to the development of national identity [3] [4] [5] [6]. Yeung stated that the behaviors of Hanfu enthusiasts represent the positive implications of patriotism to the country by demonstrating individual's passion for Chinese heritage [7]. Combining their views, it can be seen that Hanfu is related to self-expression in terms of belonging, self-hood and national hood. The Hanfu Movement aims to promote excellent traditional culture and enhance national cohesion, thus strengthening the soft power of China. Although it may seem nostalgic in appearance, it is future oriented.

Moreover, Yeung noted that incorporating ethnic beliefs with a modern commercial lifestyle could serve as a means for Hanfu enthusiasts to convey patriotic pride [7]. This is also consistent with Gerth's prior assertion that since contemporary times, Chinese patriotism and consumer culture have been closely connected [8]. It should be recognized that consumer culture has imbued clothing with increasingly personalized and symbolic significance. According to scholars, wearing Hanfu shows an individual's yearning for individuality [9]. Additionally, as Chen suggested, Hanfu, which is associated with elite culture's imagination, can reflect the wearer's social standing, intellect, and knowledge, therefore portraying the individual's ideal self [10]. Overall, they provide a new perspective to understand the Hanfu movement in terms of the self-expressions of Hanfu enthusiasts and made a significant contribution for future work could build on.

Goffman defines self-presentation as performative, in which individuals take on parts in encounters, just like performers in a play. As a result, individuals could intentionally alter their self-presentation in trying to obtain the best results. Among visual clues, clothing plays an important role in everyday self-presentation or identity performance [11]. It is reasonable to suppose that the wearer is approaching, building, and confirming ideal

personal identities through performance regarding dress practices. Social media provides more space and opportunities for self-expression. As Walther suggested, the online world has expanded the possibilities for strategic identity performance [12]. In comparison to offline venues, creators have complete control over the impression they create, as they can pick what to present, conceal, invent, or understate. Additionally, since individuals should actively represent themselves digitally via text and photos, the virtual world conveys the approaches and objectives driving self-presentation. In other words, social media creates a space for individuals for personal narratives. Clothing enables the interpretation and storytelling of personal experiences, as well as the possibility for the formation of new discourses and even the defiance of established expectations. Taking the communication of Hanfu culture as an example, Hanfu aficionados, create a space for themselves to construct meaning, conveying numerous identities and aspirations through individualized expressions.

Previous research has mostly mainly examined the Hanfu movement's nationalist aspirations and visions from a collectivist perspective. However, there is a dearth of attention paid to the self-expressions of individual Hanfu enthusiasts. Meanwhile, previous studies have rarely examined the personal expression of Hanfu enthusiasts on social media and have to some extent neglected the role of clothing in shaping personal identity. To address the aforementioned research gaps, this study chose a representative Weibo Hanfu blogger as the subject of case study and conduct content analysis on her Weibo content. This paper will contribute to the study of Hanfu and identity by examining the self-presentation of Hanfu culture on social media.

3. METHODOLOGY

The Hanfu Weibo blogger I am not Xiaoxin was chosen as a case study to gain a better understanding of the practical use of Hanfu in self-presentation and identity expression of Hanfu enthusiast. As Bryman and Bell suggested, a case study design is used to extensively explore and analyses a specific case [13]. Her social media posts served the basic data for the qualitative content analysis. As Kondracki and Wellman noted, an inductive research technique combined with qualitative content analysis facilitates the emergence of categories and category labels in the data, allowing the investigator to gain more insights [14].

The first step was case study selection. I am not Xiaoxin, a famous hanfu Weibo blogger, was picked for several reasons. She is a typical Hanfu movement activist, well versed in Hanfu culture, with a strong enthusiasm in hanfu-related activities and a high level of education. She is relatively well known in the Hanfu culture interest circle, with about 345,000 followers. Moreover, she posts content related to Hanfu on Weibo

on a daily basis and her posts are of high quality. Weibo officially recognizes her as a famous traditional Chinese cultural blogger in recognition of her contribution to spreading the culture of Chinese costume. This indicates that a substantial volume of data is accessible for analysis. Her blogs mostly focus on the consumption and wearing of hanfu, and frequently feature an entirely traditional aesthetic. Her postings frequently have a poetic tone, with frequent quotations of classic poetry. The data analysis period spans September 2021 to November 2021 and contains posts in relation to Hanfu. This research conducted multiple observations of various sections of the blog includes 119 Weibo postings, which aided in the selection of a single case study. A highly interpretative richness will be achieved in the case by conducting an intensive case study of a blogger [15].

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter summarizes and discusses common themes uncovered throughout the preceding data analysis. This article suggests that an individual's interpretation of Hanfu is developed via a synthesis of traditional legacy, commercial culture, and individual performance. The performance centered on and predicated on Hanfu is the result of a number of factors includes the historical definition of Hanfu, the individual's knowledge of Hanfu, the adaptation of Hanfu to the individual's demand for self-presentation. The symbolic implications and Hanfu's function in each of these topics are examined and explored in order to evaluate how a person presents/performs themselves in connection to the sort of clothing practice. Hanfu's meaning may be derived from what it can symbolize, how it should be shown, how the wearer's actions influence how Hanfu is presented, and how Hanfu is related with the wearer's identity. This chapter is divided into three subsections. (1) The first part examines how Hanfu communicates the wearer's social position in historical and consumer culture settings. (2) The second part discusses the link between Hanfu and gender, as well as the ideal self of the individual in the performance of the ancient elite figure. (3) The third section explores the attitudes towards tradition and the ways in which people cope with modern life as demonstrated through Hanfu activities.

4.1 Hanfu and consumption

Consumption is a recurrent theme in content analysis. The selection and application of Hanfu not only transmit information about the wearer's particular consuming power but also about personal taste, cultural capital, and social status. Giddens argued that contemporary modern consumer culture offers people with multiple opportunities to create and construct their identities, and they can do so in increasingly innovative and diverse ways [16]. Individuals can approach merchandise

consumption in a variety of ways to identify and differentiate their identities. With the diversification and enhancement of the aesthetic value of Hanfu items, Hanfu appears to be gradually being purposefully structured within the context of self-expression via consuming. Hanfu can be explored in terms of its function in contemporary consumption, particularly in terms of self-identity, economic position, taste, and lifestyle.

It was discovered that the Hanfu blogger consumes Hanfu on a regular basis and owns a considerable number of expensive Hanfu items. In fact, hanbok is not suitable for most daily life situations of work and study. The chances that an individual will wear Hanbok in their life are relatively few. Therefore, the purchase of impractical and expensive hanbok may also serve as a reference for one's consuming power. The majority of Hanfu bloggers' posts indicated the brand of the apparel, which provided an indication of its price and quality. With the high cost of fabric and personalization, the production a Hanfu item costs between RMB 2,500 and 7,000, which is higher than the market price of a typical garment of RMB 500 to 800, according to a research conducted by CBNDATA and TMALL [17]. Together with the multiple visual and textual message, Hanfu may communicate the price and consumption capability of the wearer and is consequently associated with an individual's social status.

Along with displaying one's consumption ability, wearing Hanfu in contemporary China demonstrates an aesthetic sensitivity. The blogger demonstrates her taste and personality through the incorporation of Hanfu into a personalized aesthetic context. The blogger is keen to showcase the intricate details of the garments. The photographs in these blogs show the subtleties of her attire, which include delicate and exquisite patterns, beautiful colors, and textured-looking fabrics that indicate a refined sense of style. The design of Hanfu differs according to dynasty. Simultaneously, Hanfu items vary in terms of craftsmanship, design, materials, and quality owing to production cost variances. As a consequence, heterogeneous Hanfu goods offer consumers a diverse range of options, as well as a multitude of ways to express their aesthetics, taste, and expertise. As Zhou highlighted, the persistent pursuit of the Hanfu style and the deep understanding of Hanfu somehow constitutes and shows the cultural capital of the wearer [3].

Moreover, the text of most of the blogger's posts is highly literary and knowledgeable. The blogger tends to quote ancient poetry in order to convey specific atmospheric beauty and contextual imagery. Besides, in some posts, the blogger shares historical knowledge related to Hanfu to the public. In addition, the specific scenes in the photographs are an integral part of the presentation of Hanfu culture. Many of the photos in the

post use beautiful landscapes and ancient architecture as the backdrop, suggesting a quality lifestyle. Overall, clothing functions as the commodity that conveys personal identity in terms of consumer power, aesthetic sensibility, cultural capital through visual and literal symbols.

4.2 Hanfu and gender

This section discusses Hanfu's connection with gender. A recurring topic in the posts is the impersonation of old elite female personalities. In a typical post, using historical materials or figure painting as inspiration, the blogger mimicked the appearance of ancient women, including attire, hairdo, make-up, headgear, and posture. This section analyses the role of Hanfu in giving the modern woman traditional aristocratic femininity. The individual performative self-presentation not only reflects the ideal self - the elegant, noble and intellectual individual - but also portrays a rich lifestyle marked by affluence and leisure.

An awareness of the symbolic meaning of Hanfu will aid in understanding the role of traditional clothing as a medium of communication. The modern Hanfu system is established from the ancient Han Chinese aristocracy, who possessed power, riches, and expertise. Apart from its protective and functional utility, the clothing in earlier civilizations was used to differentiate social classes by its distinctive features. Despite the fact that the role of Hanfu in distinguishing social class has ceased to exist in modern society, the privileged culture it signifies continues to inspire imagination.



Figure 1 An aristocratic woman of the Ming Dynasty

Above is a photograph of a blogger imitating the appearance of an aristocratic woman of the Ming Dynasty. The woman in the image is wearing a tourmaline-colored Chinese dress of woven gold-made-up flower satin. The style of her dress and the elaborate ornaments suggest her status as an imperial mandate Mrs. With a reserved demeanor and elegant posture, she stands in the Temple of Heaven Park, a place of worship for the feudal emperors. The figure of an graceful and cultured aristocratic woman is shaped by a composition of

elaborate headdresses, exquisite hair and make-up, and luxurious costumes. In the understanding of traditional Chinese culture, the beauty of a woman was thought to come from her inner virtues, which were assessed by her body motions instead of her figure. The beauty of the wearer is expressed through the appearance of the garment and the temperament of her.

How Hanfu is presented is associated with the understanding, fantasy and interpretation of the traditional Chinese aristocratic woman by the wearer. It can be seen that Hanfu provides a room for self-expression, where the wearer approaches the ideal image of the ancient elite female through performances, with the core being clothing and the attired body serving as the medium, seems to state a truth. Individuals' clothing choices, according to Pallis, reflect how they see themselves in their heads and the characteristics they wish to portray [18]. Through the performance, the wearer conveys to the audience an iconic picture of the ancient elite, as well as the ideal self and the aspirations to the beauty, taste and spirit of the ancient noblewoman.

4.3 Invented tradition as an inversion of the present

The embrace of nature and the human spirit emerged as a common subject in the postings, according to the content analysis. The following is a summary of the three primary categories discussed. (1) emulating the graceful lifestyle of ancient literati, such as visiting places of historical interest, composing ancient poems, and playing traditional musical instruments; (2) following traditional customs and activities in relation to twenty-four solar terms, such as spring excursions and kite flying; (3) embracing and appreciating nature. Eicher and Sumberg have pointed out that ethnic clothing has a reasonably consistent pattern and design features, signifying the historical foundations of traditions and the succession of culture [19]. As a symbol of traditional Chinese culture, Hanfu contributes to the further distinction between modern culture and traditional humanity spirits. It serves as a conduit for the individual to connect with an idealized past. In self-presentation of the blogger, Hanfu is an invented tradition in response to change, the retrospective romanticization of tradition can be viewed as a attitude towards modern life. In her posts, the blogger demonstrates an affiliation with a natural, true, and poetic way of being.

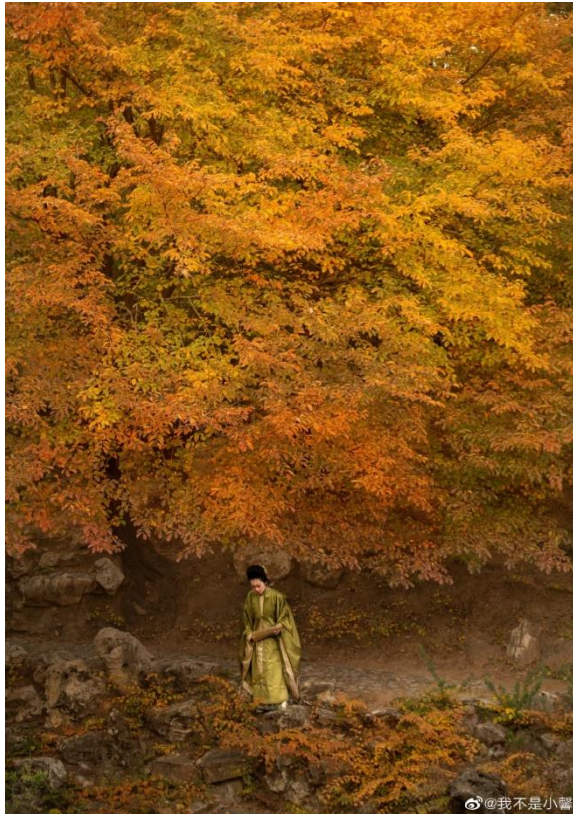


Figure 2 A woman in a long robe holds a bamboo umbrella as she strolls along a path through the hills

In the image above, lush maple leaves occupy most of the frame, showing the arrival of autumn. A woman in a long robe holds a bamboo umbrella as she strolls along a path through the hills. In the text, the blogger quotes the classical Chinese poem 'The southern mountains and the autumn colors are both of the same magnitude', meaning that the autumn colors are so high and far-reaching that it is difficult to distinguish the magnitude from the steep and cloudy Southern Mountains. The poem's lofty, spacious and clear autumn colors are in fact a symbol and externalization of the poet's mind. It expresses the extremely poetic and self-satisfied lifestyle of the ancient literati, and the state of harmony between the individual and nature. In the post, the inner and outer worlds of the individual seem to be able to connect with the time and space of the ancient literati.

The blogger's performance may be viewed as a constructive and well-chosen presentation, replete with romantic vision about the perfect conventional life. She embraced nature in her post, gazing into the distance, appreciating maple leaves, and wondering in the autumn. The picture and prose were merged to accomplish this process of attaining the perfect self-image and turning it into a stable fact through digital recordings on Weibo. What she portrays can be described as a leisurely, naturalistic and lyrical life that stands in stark contrast to a modern lifestyle characterised by uncertainty, tension, and a fast pace. As Yuan noted, tradition is an infinite vehicle for fantasy and an enduring origin of identity,

which generates a self-satisfied vision of traditional culture as the panacea [20]. By momentarily reverting to the romantic and ideal traditional way of life, Hanfu enthusiasts convey their views and attitudes about modern life, seeking spiritual nourishment inside the confines of a steady and everlasting tradition in a world of constant change, stress and impulse.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper examined the function of Hanfu in forming and communicating identity, and the ideal self and way of life conveyed through the self-presentation. It was demonstrated that Hanfu conveys individual's identity in terms of consumption, taste, and social position. Meanwhile, heterogeneous Hanfu commodities allowed individuals numerous avenues for self-expression. Furthermore, the Hanfu blogger presented an ideal self-image of beauty, refinement, and nobility through the creative performances of ancient Han aristocratic women and conveys a lifestyle of prosperity, leisure and excellence. Additionally, Hanfu serves as a conduit for the individual to connect with an ideal past. As a coping mechanism for spiritual issues in a fast changing, demanding, and impulsive environment, romanticized recall of tradition indicates the individual's affiliation with a authentic and poetic of existence. The content analysis of image-text postings on Weibo thus provides a more insight into the self-expression of Hanfu enthusiast. This work contributes to the body of knowledge about the Hanfu movement by exploring the identities of Hanfu enthusiasts as reflected in their performances. Furthermore, it contributes to a better comprehension of the role of Hanfu and the link between Hanfu and identity.

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